



Master's thesis

Tourism geography

**Geopolitical ecology of tourism
in Darién, Panama**
Local perceptions of environment and power in transition

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2020

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Tiedekunta – Fakultet – Faculty		Osasto – Institution – Department	
Faculty of Science		Department of Geosciences and Geography	
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Tutkielman otsikko – Avhandlingens titel – Title of thesis			
Geopolitical ecology of tourism in Darién, Panama – Local perceptions of environment and power in transition			
Koulutusohjelma ja opintosuunta – Utbildningsprogram och studieriktning – Programme and study track			
Master's programme in geography, Human geography/Tourism geography			
Tutkielman taso – Avhandlingens nivå – Level of the thesis	Aika – Datum – Date	Sivumäärä – Sidoantal – Number of pages	
Master's thesis, 40 credits	November 2020	101	
Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract			
<p>This study addresses the ways in which environmental challenges and power relations are manifested through tourism in the easternmost province of Panama, Darién. Historically, the area of Darién has remained relatively isolated from the rest of the country and tourism in the area is of small-scale. However, the high biodiversity and natural resources have drawn increasing attention, thus resulting in tensions and competing interests between different stakeholders. Local perceptions of tourism bring insight about how people make sense of and engage with touristic activities, and how geopolitical and ecological discourses contribute to environmental inequalities.</p> <p>The theoretical background draws from geopolitical ecology, which states the role and impact of the environment in the shaping of political space and power relations. The research is based on 37 thematic interviews and participant observation carried out during a one-month ethnographic fieldwork in Darién.</p> <p>The findings indicate that tourism has contributed to exposing the environmental challenges in Darién, but also caused controversy over the use of resources for tourism. Tourism brings forward power relations and demonstrates that different players are in an uneven position. The results show that tourism in Darién has been influenced by its remoteness and the nowadays largely misleading assumption of its unstable security situation. Darién faces a broad range of environmental problems, resulting mainly from the State's weak presence and poor environmental policies. However, tourism has been locally able to enhance environmental awareness and interest towards conservation. Different tourism actors have unequal possibilities in making use of natural resources depending largely on their wealth and social networks. Further geopolitical interests appear through territorial issues and questions concerning land ownership. The findings indicate that by looking at tourism, many underlying tensions related to existing social inequalities, power relations and distribution of ecological benefits can be revealed.</p>			
Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords			
Panama, Darién, tourism, geopolitical ecology, political ecology, geopolitics, environment, power relations			
Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited			
University of Helsinki electronic theses library E-thesis/HELDA			
Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information			



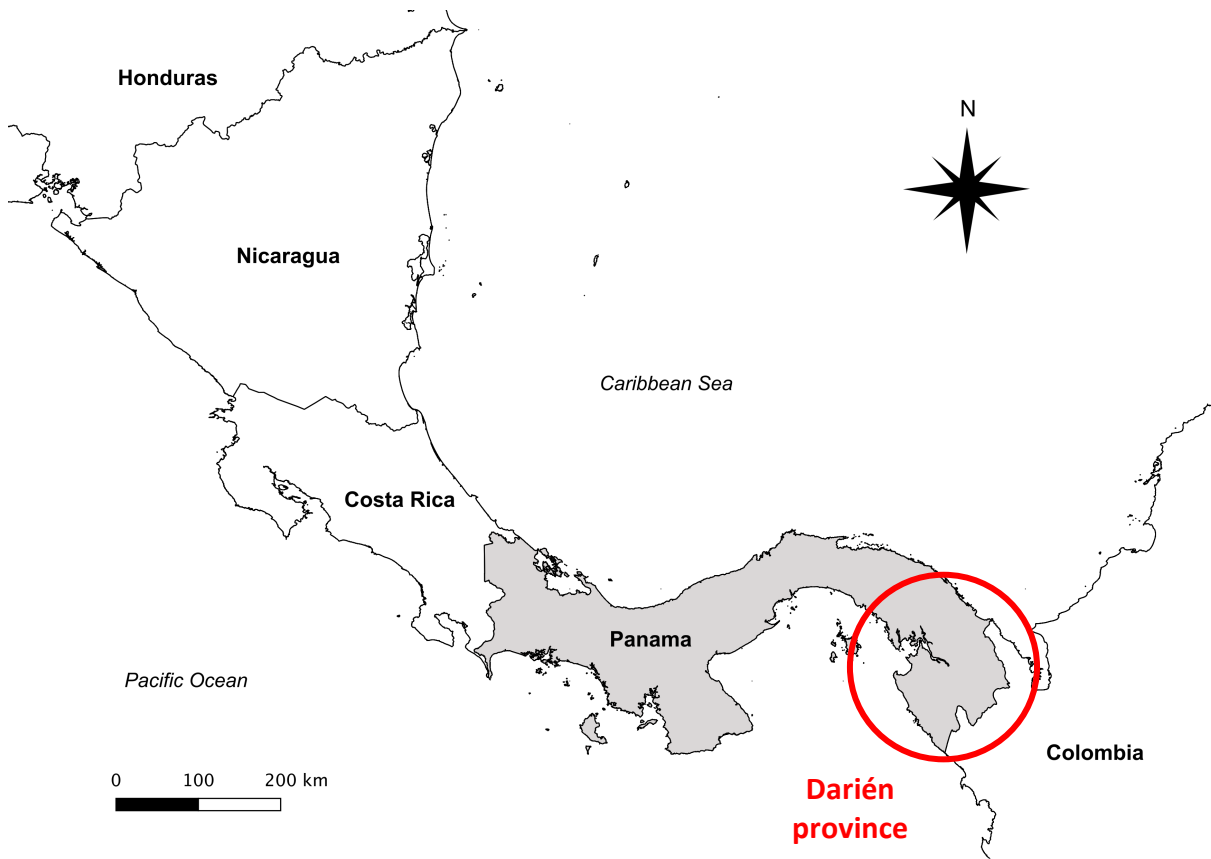
Tiedekunta – Fakultet – Faculty		Osasto – Institution – Department	
Matemaattis-luonnontieteellinen tiedekunta		Geotieteiden ja maantieteen osasto	
Tekijä – Författare – Author			
Maija Meri			
Tutkielman otsikko – Avhandlings titel – Title of thesis			
Geopolitical ecology of tourism in Darién, Panama – Local perceptions of environment and power in transition			
Koulutusohjelma ja opintosuunta – Utbildningsprogram och studieinriktning – Programme and study track			
Maantieteen maisteriohjelma, Aluetiede/Matkailumaantiede			
Tutkielman taso – Avhandlings nivå – Level of the thesis	Aika – Datum – Date	Sivumäärä – Sidoantal – Number of pages	
Pro gradu, 40 opintopistettä	Marraskuu 2020	101	
Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract			
<p>Tutkimus käsittelee ympäristöhaasteiden ja valtasuhteiden ilmentymistä matkailussa Panaman itäisimmässä provinssissa Darienissa. Historiallisesti Darienin alue on ollut melko eriytynyt muusta maasta, ja matkailu alueella on vähäistä. Alueen biodiversiteetti ja luonnonvarat ovat kuitenkin herättäneet yhä enemmän kiinnostusta, mutta toisaalta aiheuttaneet jännitteitä ja kilpailua eri toimijoiden välillä. Paikallisten käsitykset matkailusta auttavat ymmärtämään, miten ihmiset hahmottavat matkailua, ja miten geopolittiset ja ekologiset diskurssit vaikuttavat ympäristölliseen epätasa-arvoon.</p> <p>Teoreettinen viitekehys pohjautuu geopolittiseen ekologiaan, joka keskittyy ympäristön rooliin ja vaikutukseen poliittisen tilan ja valtasuhteiden muovaamisessa. Tutkimuksen aineistona on 37 teemahaastattelua ja osallistavaan havainnointiin perustuva kuukauden mittainen etnografinen kenttätyö Darienissa.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittavat, että matkailu on osaltaan tuonut Darienin ympäristöhaasteita näkyvämmäksi, mutta myös aiheuttanut kiistoja resurssien käytöstä matkailun tarpeisiin. Matkailu tuo esiin valtasuhteita ja osoittaa, että eri toimijat ovat keskenään epätasa-arvoisessa asemassa. Tutkimus paljastaa, että saavutettavuus ja sijainti, sekä nykyään pitkälti harhaanjohtava käsitys alueen epävakaasta turvallisuustilanteesta ovat vaikuttaneet Darienin matkailuun. Darienissa on paljon erilaisia ympäristöongelmia, jotka juontavat juurensa valtion heikosta roolista ja huonosta ympäristöpolitiikasta. Matkailu on kuitenkin paikallisesti pystynyt lisäämään ympäristötietoisuutta ja kiinnostusta luonnonsuojeluun. Eri matkailualan toimijoilla on eriarvoiset mahdollisuudet hyödyntää luonnonvaroja riippuen pääosin heidän vauraudestaan ja sosiaalisista verkostoistaan. Laajemmat geopolittiset intressit ilmenevät maanomistusta koskevien kysymysten myötä. Tulokset osoittavat, että tarkastelemalla matkailua voidaan saada selville monia olemassa olevaan sosiaaliseen eriarvoisuuteen, valtasuhteisiin ja ekologisten hyötyjen jakamiseen liittyviä jännitteitä.</p>			
Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords			
Panama, Darién, matkailu, geopolittinen ekologia, poliittinen ekologia, geopolitiikka, ympäristö, valtasuhteet			
Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited			
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Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information			

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Map of Panama



Map of Darién and fieldwork locations



Source: Base map retrieved from mapsof.net.

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1. La Palma | 10. Puerto Piña |
| 2. Mogosenega | 11. Jaqué |
| 3. Seteganti | 12. Biroquera |
| 4. Taimatí | 13. Santa Fé |
| 5. Cémaco | 14. Metetí |
| 6. Garachiné | 15. Nuevo Vigía |
| 7. La Chunga | 16. Yaviza |
| 8. Sambú | 17. El Real |
| 9. Puerto Indio | 18. Pijibasal |

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Abbreviations

ANAM	Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente (National Environmental Authority)
ANCON	Asociación de Conservación de la Naturaleza de Panamá (Association of Environmental Conservation of Panama)
ATP	Autoridad de Turismo de Panamá (Tourism Authority of Panama)
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CBO	Community-based organization
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army)
INEC	Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo (National Institute of Statistics and Census)
IPAT	Instituto Panameño de Turismo (Panamanian Tourist Institute)
MIAMBIENTE	Ministerio de Ambiente de Panamá (Ministry of Environment of Panama)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SENAFRONT	Servicio Nacional de Fronteras (National Border Service)
SGP	Small Grants Programme
SENAN	Servicio Nacional Aeronaval (National Aeronaval Service of Panama)
SINAP	Sistema Nacional de Áreas Protegidas (National System of Protected Areas)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization
WTTC	World Travel & Tourism Council

1 INTRODUCTION

The province of Darién (in Spanish orthography) in the easternmost part of Panama is one of the highest in biodiversity in the tropical Americas. Nevertheless, the area has been subject to ongoing environmental deterioration, thus rapidly altering the dynamics of the province. Darién has for long remained relatively isolated from the rest of the country, and compared to other provinces it has fallen behind in development according to several socio-economic indicators. Tourism has been a growing part of the economy in Panama, but tourism in Darién has remained limited and controversial due to various reasons. Nevertheless, interest in tourism has been growing lately. Because tourism in Darién is largely based on the natural and cultural diversity, tensions have been increasing over the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources as different stakeholders pursue their interests.

In general, there is a lack of academic and accurate studies from Darién addressing the complex socio-environmental issues present in the province. In previous research tourism has been touched upon only briefly among other topics (see eg. Suman, 2007b; Vélasquez Runk, 2015; Vélasquez Runk, 2017; Vélasquez Runk et al. 2006), or focused exclusively on indigenous communities (see eg. Snow, 2000). Tourism in Darién has undoubtedly been perceived in the context of ecotourism without further specifying its meaning, or questioning its possible outcomes. Ecological research in Darién has centered around specific projects from a rather narrow environmental perspective (see eg. Covich, 2015; Miller, 2014), or been discussed in the context of indigenous lands (see eg. Herlihy, 2003; Vélasquez Runk, 2012). This study was aimed at filling in the existing gap of tourism research in Darién, and broadening knowledge of people's everyday realities. Tourism provides a fruitful and topical means of addressing how environmental assets are unequally distributed, as many communities have been engaging in tourism in the hope for additional income opportunities.

Historically, the societal environmental discourse has experienced huge changes that have influenced tourism with a slight delay. The period after the Second World War

was characterized by the creation of different instruments to promote development and wealth. Since the 1950s the demand for international travel began to slowly increase in the western countries, although tourism was restricted to a relatively small elite and domestic tourism was the most common form of travel (Holden, 2000). In the 1960s, the negative environmental effects of human actions started to become more evident leading to an increased environmental awareness and establishing environmental sciences as an academic discipline. Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1962), focusing on the destructive effects of the use of pesticides in agriculture, was one of the first publications to critically examine the concrete effects of human action on the environment. At the same time, international tourism became more accessible to a wider public, and mass tourism began to gain popularity especially in the coastal areas of the western Mediterranean. Still, tourism development expressed little or no concern over the possible effects on the environment. (Holden, 2000).

In the 1970s, environmental awareness kept gaining importance with scientific proof about global warming and pollution. The Club of Rome's report *Limits of Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) addressed the concern over the Earth's limited carrying capacity and the unsustainable use of natural resources. Because of the continuing spread of mass tourism, its role began to be critically questioned from the environmental point of view. During the 1980s, environmental problems, such as global warming, ozone depletion, acid rain and the loss of tropical rainforests, were more broadly recognized. The nuclear power plant accident of Chernobyl in 1986 showed the vulnerability of the environment and the severe consequences of such incidents. The Brundtland Commission's report *Our Common Future* in 1987, sponsored by the United Nations, was among the first international statements linking contemporary development politics and environmental concerns, although later criticized for its rhetoric of modernization and global intervention. Green consumerism grew with the aim to safeguard the environment for the coming generations. Tourism was geographically spreading to other parts of the world, like South-East Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean. Tourism became more versatile, while traditional mass tourism destinations were losing popularity. In many Third World countries, tourism was incorporated as a central strategy for development.

The 1990s, was characterized by more concrete actions and protests by the environmentalist movement. The building of new infrastructure, genetically modified crops, increased logging of rainforests and inequalities in the world trade raised strong opinions globally. Alternative, supposedly more environmentally friendly forms of tourism, like ecotourism, began gaining interest. After the millennium, tourism continued its growth worldwide and was no longer a privilege only for the people in the western world. In many countries the growing middle class could afford to travel. Travelling and seeking new experiences became part of everyday life, as no environment was considered too remote or inaccessible for tourism (Holden, 2000, p. 21).

Tourism trends have been shifting as the awareness of the climate-damaging nature of tourism has reached a growing number of people. Still, the desire to travel and see the world has kept expanding, putting continuous pressure on the environment. For example, many airline companies have established optional possibilities for compensating the emissions by donating to projects that reduce carbon dioxide such as wind power or reforestation. Carbon offsetting has however been criticized for buying a clean conscience, for the lack of transparency of the process, and for not tackling the emission problem itself. Land travel has been gaining popularity, and virtual technologies provide potential means of discovering the world without the need to move physically. Developing renewable and sustainable alternatives has been an ongoing process.

After all, at the moment the whole world has been faced by a completely new situation due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The tourism sector is amongst the most heavily affected, as travel has basically come to a standstill. Effects of the pandemic on the world economy have been massive, reaching far beyond tourism. On the other hand, the circumstances have already invoked arguments in favor of the environment, as much of the heavy industry has diminished, and international air travel and traffic emissions have declined. These recent global events demonstrate the role of tourism as a geopolitical-ecological actor and state the timeliness of the research topic.

Aims of the study and research questions

Darién provides interesting research opportunities for examining the role of tourism from an environmental perspective due to its unique location between two continents and as an area, where geopolitical interests and remoteness come together. Drawing on geopolitical ecology as a theoretical framework, and based on ethnographic fieldwork, this study analyzes how environmental challenges and power relations become evident through tourism from a local perspective. Geopolitical ecology integrates the assets of political ecology and geopolitics, and is viewed as a means of addressing social inequalities, power relations and distribution of ecological benefits on different scales. Both geopolitics and political ecology have been surprisingly little, and only recently, studied from a tourism viewpoint despite their high relevance for tourism.

The overall aim of this study is to find out how environmental challenges and power relations are manifested through tourism in Darién, where tourism development has historically remained limited. The study is divided into three core research questions:

- *What do the locals view as the main factors that influence tourism in Darién?*
- *How do local actors perceive the role of tourism in addressing environmental issues?*
- *How is tourism understood to shape the contest over resources, interests and power relations between different stakeholders?*

This work aims to contribute to the recent work on the conceptualization of geopolitical ecology (Belcher et al., 2020; Bigger & Neimark, 2017; Castree, 2003; Dalby, 1992, 2000, 2003 & 2014; Massé & Margulies, 2020), and specifically to the emerging work on the role of geopolitical ecology in tourism. The study intends to expand the theoretical and empirical knowledge on the human-environment relationship, and related power and resource imbalances, thus broadening the

understanding of tourism as a geopolitical practice. The study follows a bottom-up approach by examining the underlying tensions arising from the social and environmental impacts of tourism.

Tourism is a multi- and cross-disciplinary subject drawing from the disciplines of geography, anthropology, sociology and economy, as well as environmental studies and development studies. As a thesis of tourism geography, this study aims to contribute to the overall knowledge of the area of Darién, and to provide important insight from the grassroots level. The purpose of this study is not to take a stance on whether tourism should or should not be developed in Darién. However, the results should be considered in possible future tourism development and environmental policies in the Darién area at a local, national, and global level.

The study consists of seven main sections. The next section, theoretical framework, begins with introducing the central concepts -tourism, environment and power-, and continues by explaining the intellectual origins of geopolitical ecology in more detail. The methodology chapter discusses interviews and observation as qualitative research methods, and provides more information on gathering data in the field and about how the data was analyzed. Chapter four puts the study into context by describing the geographical and historical features of Darién, and by reviewing past tourism development in the province. The results of the study are presented in chapter five in three leading sections divided according to the main research questions. The results are discussed in chapter six in reflection with earlier studies and present-day circumstances. At the end, ethical considerations, possible biases and limitations of the study are evaluated, and brought forward with suggestions for future research. Finally, brief concluding remarks are presented.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Central concepts of the study

2.1.1 Tourism

Tourism is commonly associated with the relatively recent idea of travel for recreation. Nevertheless, travel as a phenomenon dates already back to earlier times when people travelled mainly for necessity or curiosity; religious, educational and health reasons (Holden, 2000). The word *tourism* emerged in the era of the Grand Tour, a custom of the mainly British upper-class young men, who left abroad as part of their education. By definition, the word *tourism* involves travel and has its roots in the Greek term *ornos*, describing a circle, which reflects the essence of tourism about returning to the point of departure. (Leiper, 1979). It has resulted challenging to find a general definition for tourism, which would be compatible with technical, academic and other purposes, and applicable in both international and domestic contexts. Multiple stakeholders, such as governments, private tourism businesses, local people and communities as well as tourists, all have their own interests, which complicate the consensual definition.

Leiper (1979) identifies three approaches in attempts of defining tourism: economic, technical and holistic. Definitions stating the economic or business implications of tourism are narrow and tend to lack the human, spatial and temporal elements, which are all central for tourism. Governments and tourist industry organizations have adopted more technical definitions due to the need for monitoring the size and characteristics of tourist markets. These definitions require a more particular description for *tourist*, thus creating conflicting opinions about the purpose for travel, distance travelled and duration of travel. For example, UNWTO (2020) describes tourism as "a social, cultural and economic phenomenon, which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes." The definition was originally proposed in 1991 in the International Conference on Travel and Tourism Statistics, and further developed by the UN Statistical Commission in 1993 (UNWTO, 2010). Tourism is recognized as a

subset for *travel*, which refers to the movement of people between different geographical locations for any purpose and any duration.

Holistic definitions pursuing to capture the whole essence of tourism are often too broad and leave room for interpretation. In a system-based definition Leiper (1979) suggests that tourism is "The system involving the discretionary travel and temporary stay of persons away from their usual place of residence for one or more nights, excepting tours made for the primary purpose of earning remuneration from points en route". He specifies four facets framing the tourism system definition: geographical (spatial element), behavioral (human element), industrial and environmental.

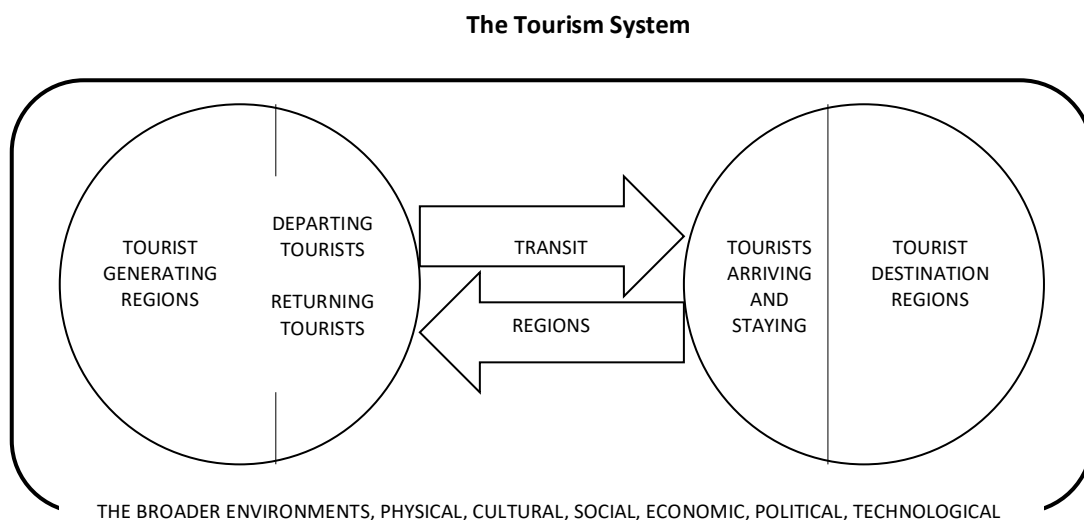


Figure 1: The Tourism System.

Source: Adapted from Leiper (1979): The framework of tourism: Towards a definition of tourism, tourist, and the tourist industry.

The figure illustrates the tourism system comprising of elements arranged in spatial and functional connections: tourists, generating regions, transit routes, destination regions, and a tourist industry. It is an open system, where these five elements operate within broader environments: physical, cultural, social, economic, political and technological.

In defining tourism, it is helpful to separate the *concept* from the *technical definitions*. While technical definitions give instruments for statistical, legislative, and industrial purposes, the concept is more fruitful for academic means, providing a notional, theoretical framework with the essential characteristics of tourism as a phenomenon (Burkart & Medlik, 1974, p. 39). Debating the meaning of tourism is vital in planning the use of natural resources and in managing the environmental impacts related to tourism development (Holden, 2000).

2.1.2 Environment and environmental problem

In its broadest and most abstract sense, the environment can refer to all the physical and biological conditions surrounding us, including water, air, soil, flora and fauna. Humans perceive the environment often consisting of natural, social, cultural, economic and political features. The environment can also be divided into natural, built or man-made and cultural environment, which all are interconnected through human actions. (Hunter & Green, 1995). Anthropogenic environmental change poses increasing threats to global security, exacerbating issues such as poverty, social tensions, corruption and weak political institutions, which challenges domestic and international order across many countries (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016, p. 227). Correspondingly, existing political tensions and instabilities play part in accelerating climate change, although the causes and consequences get easily intertwined (Dalby, 2014).

Defining an environmental problem is complicated, as it depends on subjective values, multiple perceptions and explanations. A specific matter becomes a problem, when it is actually viewed as a problem; and what is now considered a problem might not have been considered such earlier. For example, Mitchell (2009) has described environmental problems from a relatively anthropocentric perspective. He considers them being impacts of human activities on the natural environment, viewed as negative by a significant proportion of people. Yet, room for interpretation is left with regard to the sufficient amount of people.

Environmental problems related to the natural environment often occur as a result of human interference and should therefore be addressed as social problems (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). Environmental problems are thus socially constructed involving subjective assessments, perceptions, and valuations that are often contested (Mitchell, 2009). As stated by Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) "One person's degradation is another's soil fertility". Environmental problems differ in time and space. Specific problems occur in different time spheres and can be chronic, slowly moving or acute. The scale of problems can vary from global, such as air pollution and climate change, deforestation, species extinction, soil degradation and overpopulation to locally occurring issues. Common for environmental problems is that they have social causes and consequences. (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987).

2.1.3 Power

Power is a complex phenomenon and a key concept in social science research, subject to a variety of definitions. Generally, it refers to the capability of accomplishing a certain objective. For instance, Weber (1947) defined it as the ability to control others, events, or resources; to make happen what one wants to happen in spite of obstacles, resistance, or opposition. Instead, Foucault (1980) associated power with knowledge of individuals, and viewed it as flexible and contextual (Foucault, 1990). In postcolonial, post-development, and critical development geography, theories of power explain the ways in which the hegemonic discourse of development is produced, maintained and privileged.

Power is in the center of tourism, because there are multiple stakeholders involved. Issues of access, control, and the distribution of costs and benefits are present often acting as motives for conflict (Nepal et al., 2016, p. 8, in Nepal, S., & Saarinen, J.). "Tourism has often been criticized as a neo-colonial form of imperialism, which reinforces the unequal power relationship between its stakeholders including the tourists, the host communities, development agencies including non-governmental and private entities and government agencies" (ibid. p. 6).

2.2 Geopolitical ecology and tourism

2.2.1 Situating geopolitical ecology

Geopolitical ecology is a conceptual framework that combines the strengths of political ecology with those of geopolitics in order to account for, and gain a deeper understanding of the role of geopolitical institutions in environmental change (Bigger & Neimark, 2017, p. 14). Geopolitical ecology addresses the role and impact of the environment in the shaping of political space (Mostafanezhad, 2018; Mostafanezhad & Evrard, 2018), and provides tools for interrogating how issues of geopolitical and environmental concern re-shape one another (Massé & Margulies, 2020, p. 14).

The ecology in geopolitical ecology emphasizes on how certain threats posed to nature help shape foreign policy, but also how geopolitical dynamics have material implications for biodiversity and the ways in which it is managed on the ground in specific places (Massé & Margulies, 2020, p. 2). Inserting the geo prefix puts emphasis on institutions and power relations that behave geopolitically and shape environments through actions and discourses of geopolitical statecraft (Massé & Margulies, 2020, p. 3). Integrating political ecology and critical geopolitics aims to develop synergies between multi-scale environmental politics and the discursive material co-construction of global institutional geopolitics (Bigger & Neimark, 2017, p. 14).

Geopolitical ecology in itself is a recent idea, which, as such, has been employed for example in investigating foreign conservation and illegal wildlife trade (Massé & Margulies, 2017), and the role of the military as an environmental actor (Bigger & Neimark, 2017). Tourism is increasingly associated with geopolitical ecology by attending matters such as environmental conservation in the name of tourism development, the physicality of climate change in tourism destinations, and the use of global environmental discourse in developing and branding tourism destinations (Dalby, 2013; Mostafanezhad, 2018). For example, Mostafanezhad and Evrard (2018) argue that geopolitical discourses of transboundary haze production in Thailand, Laos and Myanmar, are shaped by tourists and the tourism industry contributing to an

inequitably distributed disaster risk. The transboundary haze problem, a result of biomass burning and urban air pollution, has become an ecological actor that co-produces discourses of escape among mobile tourists and residents.

Following the tradition of political ecology, geopolitical ecology is not considered a theory as such, but a research field, approach or framework, with its roots in a larger body of work combining the critique of ecological anthropology, cultural ecology and Marxist political economy. It stems from post-structuralism emphasizing the role of power, knowledge and discourse in the construction of what is considered as "the environment". Geopolitical ecology provides a multidisciplinary research approach to society-nature relations drawing from various academic disciplines, such as geography, anthropology, development studies, and environmental studies. Because of its recent conceptualization, it is necessary to review the background of geopolitics and political ecology more closely to better comprehend the theoretical roots of geopolitical ecology.

2.2.2 Geopolitics

The meaning and terminology of geopolitics has been contested and changed through times. Traditionally, geopolitics was interpreted as state-centric political analyses of physical territory and landscape. In the early 20th century, it referred more narrowly to a specific standpoint of political geography, often negatively associated with World War II (Agnew, 2003). The post-structural and discursive critical turn in geopolitics modernized ideas of conventional geopolitics, bringing about a broadened understanding of the term. According to critical geopolitics, geopolitics does not have a fundamental core, but instead the term has been subject to constant revise and discussion (Ó Tuathail, 1996). Critical geopolitics was developed partially, though the recognition of geopolitics as an everyday experience occurring outside of policy-making and academic discourse (Dittmer & Gray 2010, p. 1667). Based on the work of political geographer Ó Tuathail (1996), the objectives of critical geopolitics are 1) to critically examine the so-called geopolitical tradition, and 2) to study the construction

and reproduction of geographic knowledge within the practices of foreign and security policy.

The modern understanding of geopolitics clearly contradicts with the earlier assumptions in its high ontological ambiguity about how the world should be organized (Agnew, 2003, p. 115). Building on the role of discourse and power, critical and everyday geopolitics have become dominant in social sciences, providing alternative conceptual means to examine popular themes central for tourism. Works recognizing the importance of integrating and further theorizing tourism and geopolitics have only recently been growing (Dowler, 2013; Gillen & Mostafanezhad, 2019; Hall, 2017; Hall & Saarinen, 2010; Hannam, 2013; Hazbun, 2004, 2008; Mostafanezhad, 2014; Mostafanezhad & Promburom, 2018; Ojeda, 2013; Rowen, 2016; Weaver, 2010). Critical tourism studies have become more interested in the role of geopolitics within global environmental change, although topics of geopolitical relevance have been discussed in tourism earlier. Tourism is an inherently geopolitical phenomenon that comprises the movement of people across international boundaries, enabled by the exercise of the sovereign powers of both the country of origin and destination (Weaver, 2010). Also, described as the geopolitical turn in tourism geographies, tourism has become recognized as a far-reaching geopolitical practice essential to securitization, territorialization, migration, statecraft, and nation building, *inter alia*, reflecting the growing significance of tourism in international and domestic relations (Mostafanezhad, 2018).

Geopolitical perspectives promote more manifold appreciation of the relationships between tourism, representation and place-making practices, and broaden the analytical thinking on how territoriality, representation and power over destinations become critical sites of struggle for economic and political sovereignty. "Unraveling the multiple political agendas present in the manufacturing of tourism industries elucidates the critical presence of tourism throughout contemporary global affairs and political agendas". (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016, pp. 226-227). A geopolitical framework brings more insight into the tourism industry by looking beyond the traditional tourism implications (Gillen & Mostafanezhad, 2019, p. 71).

"Tourism landscapes are spaces where translocal social realities merge and rearticulate geopolitical assemblages. Perspectives from geopolitics shed analytical light on how tourism can at once constitute and reflect political discourse, while spatializing international politics as they are linked to global and local tourism industries" (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016, p. 226). The tourism encounter is a geopolitical experience, which is place-based, multi-scalar and politically mediated and co-constituted by residents and tourists (Gillen & Mostafanezhad, 2019, p. 70). Geopolitical tourism imaginaries reinforce the self-other binary through place and identity making. The self-other binary links the tourism encounter with a range of geopolitical imaginaries through its various expressions, practices, and imaginations of difference; and considers different aspects, such as borders, territoriality, sovereignty, inequality, development, wealth, home, and foreignness. (Gillen & Mostafanezhad, 2019, p. 72).

2.2.3 Political ecology

Various definitions exist for political ecology, but in its broadest sense it explores power relations among various human-nature ideologies and interactions. The early definition outlined by Blaikie and Brookfield (1987, p. 17) suggests that political ecology "combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy". It encompasses interactive effects, different geographical scales and hierarchies of socioeconomic organizations, and the contradictions between social and environmental changes through time (ibid.). Political ecology tries to understand "the complex relations between nature and society through a careful analysis of what one might call the forms of access and control over resources and their implications for environmental health and sustainable livelihoods" (Watts, 2000, p. 257). It deals with social relations and the resulting power structures that are produced and reproduced between society and nature (Escobar, 1996).

Political ecology has adopted a variety of definitions over time with the emphasis on environmental change (Watts, 1985), political economy (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987) and political institutions (Peet & Watts, 1996). Many of the definitions leave space for

multiple interpretations and room for discussion over what exactly does political ecology entail. Common for all the interpretations is that political ecology is viewed as a contrast to "apolitical ecology", where environmental issues remain outside politicizing (Robbins, 2012). Environmental change and ecological conditions are directly linked to political processes, and resolving environmental problems can only be achieved through political means due to the politicized nature of the environment (Bryant & Bailey 1997, p. 6). Politics in this context is about the interaction of actors over environmental (or other) resources, and a process in which actors partake and play a central role (ibid. p. 25).

Political ecology originated in the beginning of the 1970s, when human-environment interaction was gaining more attention among the public and academics, and as a response to the theoretical need to incorporate political dimensions to the nature-society interaction. Political ecology developed slowly, particularly in the light of cultural ecology and radical development geography. The article by anthropologist Eric Wolf (1972), *Ownership and political ecology*, stating the need to combine local ecological contexts within the wider local-global social and political economy, can be considered as laying the conceptual foundations for political ecology. It was still not until the beginning of the 1980s that new publications explaining environmental degradation continued developing the field (Watts, 1983; Blaikie, 1985; Bunker, 1985, & Hecht, 1985). The work of geographer Piers Blaikie (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Blaikie, 1985; Blaikie, Cameron & Seddon, 1980) was central in shaping the analytical framework for political ecology, and in broadening the view of the various root causes of land degradation. The key work, *Land degradation and Society* (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987), was however criticized for an overly deterministic view, and the lack of recognizing the active role of small farmers and local level power relations.

Much of the work in the 1970s and early 1980s was characterized by a neo-Marxist approach and economic determinism. The research of late 1980s shifted towards incorporating a more variable theoretical literature and a more complex appreciation on the influence of power relations in mediating human-environmental interactions. In the 1990s, political ecology began to diversify by addressing new issues and

adopting new methodological approaches, and drawing ideas from post-structuralism, discourse theory, gender theory, critical theories of science, environmental history and Marxist political economy. However, emphasis was on empirical application and studying local activities at the expense of developing theory and focusing on regional and global developments.

Political ecology was first criticized for the conceptualization of the liberal political movement against industrialization and modernity (Enzensberger, 1974). Later, critique has been targeted towards the limited way of addressing and conceptualizing power issues (Peet & Watts, 1996), and the tendency to describe problems rather than proposing solutions (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). The applicability of research findings outside the original area and context has been limited due to the lack of acknowledging the broader models how different stakeholders act operate (ibid.). According to Vayda and Walters (1999), part of the works fall into *green romanticism*, assuming that giving control over resources for local communities will lead to sustainable use of resources. Also, power and politics have been overemphasized at the expense of ecological research. The overreaction to the *ecology of politics* as a motive of developing the research field has eventually resulted in a *politics without ecology* (ibid.).

Political ecology has adapted to the changes in broader social theory and environmental politics, and followed the course of development theory in stressing the role of institutions and organizations in the context of shifting configurations of state and market roles (Peet & Watts, 1996). Historically and geographically, political ecology has mostly focused on peasant and indigenous communities in the "Third World" context. Increasingly, research has been carried out in urban environments and expanded to deal with the "First World". Environmental problems have constantly become more heterogeneous in nature, and the effect of human interference is not the same at all times and all places.

Political ecology is multi-scalar, historically situated and place-based (Mostafanezhad, 2016). The integrative approach intends to review the implications of a certain issue

at multiple levels, which are positioned within each other. The costs and benefits linked to environmental change are generally unequally distributed amidst distinct actors, influencing the existing social inequalities and affecting power relations between different parties. (Bryant & Bailey 1997, pp. 28-29). According to (Offen, 2004), historical analysis in political ecology implies more than just locating contemporary human-environmental processes in a historical context. Key aspects of historical political ecology include a field-informed interpretation of society-nature relations in the past, how and why those relations have changed over time and space, and the significance of those interpretations for improving social justice and nature conservation today. Locally based fieldwork in a specific geographical context contributes to the subtler ways how the meanings of place-based perspectives are co-constructed and negotiated within social and environmental geographies (Mostafanezhad et al., 2016).

As an interdisciplinary field, political ecology has experienced a great deal of variation in its application, which has led to different classifications. Similar perspectives are shared on political economy, but a variety of approaches are applied in analyzing nature-society interaction (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). The starting point can be a specific environmental problem or a set of problems (i.e. soil erosion, deforestation, water pollution); analyzing concepts, ideas and discourses (i.e. sustainable development, natural hazards, disasters, vulnerability); focusing on a specific geographical region; interpretation based on socio-economic characteristics (i.e. gender, class, ethnicity); or actor-oriented approach based on the interests, characters and actions of various actors in comprehending political-ecological conflicts (i.e. the state, businesses, farmers). The boundaries between different approaches are vague and combinations of various approaches complementing each other are common (Ibid.). According to Stonich (1998), the central elements of political ecology analysis include development ideologies, international interests, patterns of global economy, role of the state, class and ethnic structures, local resource users, and diversity in managing resources. Offen (2004), in turn, highlights five key themes from a geography perspective: (1) livelihood production and reproduction; (2) the relationship among social, economic and environmental change; (3) international, colonialist, state, and corporate intervention

at the community level as well as the uneven consequences and responses; (4) causes of social-environmental marginalization and its remediation; and (5) empirical field and historical research. According to Robbins (2012, p. 20) dominant topics in political ecology include: degradation and marginalization, conservation and control, environmental conflict and exclusion, environmental subjects and identity; and political objects and actors.

Regardless of the approach, political ecologists tend to agree that the environmental problems stem from broader economic and political forces instead of being simply reflections of policy or market failures, and that environmental problems are complex and deep-rooted without simple solutions. Thus, the solutions will require far-reaching changes to political-economic processes at different scales consisting of highly unequal power relations. (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). Important differences revolve around the analysis of scale, culture, the state, and the role of biophysical processes (Offen, 2004). A central focus has been to critically address the environmental destruction and poverty as consequences of dominant development strategies applied in collaboration with the state (Stonich, 1998). Since the 1970s, development paradigms have shifted from development to sustainable development, environmental conservation and biodiversity preservation influencing changes in political ecology. Despite the problematic nature of the development discourse, including the role of tourism as a development strategy in many countries, it continues to be a focal point of interest political ecology.

2.2.4 Political ecology in tourism research

For long, the debates on tourism and on political ecology developed separately, although political ecology is of great relevance in understanding the dynamics and complexities of the meanings, uses and management of natural resources, comprising of related conflicts, power relations and inequalities (Nepal et al., 2016). The critical issues of global economic and social inequality, human displacement, environmental degradation, and natural resource competition, are all closely linked to tourism (Mostafanezhad et al., 2016).

Stonich (1998) was among the first to conceptually examine tourism through a political ecology lens looking at the relationships between tourism development, water and environmental health in the Bay Islands, Honduras. Unchecked tourism development was showed to jeopardize the island's resources and cause unequal distribution of the negative effects among the residents, national and international stakeholders. Thereafter, political ecology research in tourism remained occasional (see eg. Cole, 2012, on water equity and tourism in Bali; Gezon, 2006, on political ecology and conservation in Madagascar; Gössling, 2003, on political ecology perspectives and climate change in tropical island destinations). However, the number of contributions has been growing. Two edited volumes on political ecology and tourism were issued in 2016 including a number of case studies from various geographical contexts (Mostafanezhad et al., 2016; Nepal & Saarinen, 2016). Subsequently, publications have been increasing (see eg. Jönsson, 2016; Knowles, 2019; & Rainer, 2016). Political ecology of tourism can be considered as an emerging interdisciplinary subfield with the need of further development (Mostafanezhad et al., 2016).

Tourism has the power to radically reshape environments, and rebuild economic, political and social relations. When tourism is developed in a specific place, it has the capacity to displace other alternatives of economic development and environmental conservation goals (Duffy, 2016 in Mostafanezhad et al.). Tourism-related environmental challenges are similar despite the geographical distances, while also attending the nuanced ways they materialize in local contexts. (Mostafanezhad et al., 2016). Sustainability has been a dominant paradigm in the research concerned with stakeholder power imbalances and tensions emerging from unequal allocation of resources caused by tourism-related affairs. The production of conservation, sustainable development, and sustainable tourism projects have been considered as viable means of responding to societal concerns caused by environmental conflicts (Douglas, 2014). Particularly ecotourism, tourism focused on nature, community-based tourism, and indigenous and ethnic peoples are relevant in gaining a broader understanding of the power structures involving people and nature (Nepal et al., 2016).

The common dilemma is the desire for foreign exchange through tourism development, and the question of environmental sustainability (Mostafanezhad et al., 2016). In the center of interest is the interaction between locals and external actors. Local tourism stakeholders are often marginalized, and conditions for tourism development easily escalate existing conflicts between tourism advocates and opponents. Commonly these disagreements are related to diverse conceptions of the nature of "development", historical patterns of tourism resource use, differences in power and control structures, and the appearance of local resistance towards tourism development. (Nepal et al., 2016, p. 9).

2.2.5 Theoretical composition of the present study

Based on the definitions and theoretical background introduced above, in this study tourism is viewed as an everyday geopolitical activity, where the multi-scalar nature of geopolitics is linked to broader tourism discourses and practices. Although often not acknowledged in the everyday, the study agrees that tourism develops in a historical and political context, thus doing tourism and being a tourist are not apolitical acts (Hall, 2017; Mostafanezhad, 2018; Saarinen, 2018; Weaver, 2010). The global policy arena of tourism is geopolitically structured (Saarinen, 2018), and international tourism is geopolitically informed and driven form of mobility (Weaver, 2010). Here, geopolitics follows the more neutral view of broadly describing the influence of geography on politics and international relations. The term is commonly used to describe a perspective or mode of analysis concentrated on the interrelationships between space, territory, territoriality and power (Cohen, 2003).

The history of tourism is in many respects both directly and indirectly based on colonialism and unequal socio-economic and cultural exchange, and the contemporary global tourism system can be described as being driven by neo-liberal governance, transnational corporations, capital and policies, and in many cases by neo-colonialism (Saarinen, 2018). Events such as attacks by radical groups in tourism spaces, travel restrictions given by governments, and the implications of COVID-19 on tourism, demonstrate the political aspects and high value of tourism both nationally

and internationally. Individuals' choices at the grassroots level are influenced by local decisions, made by regional and national actors, who in turn are guided by global politics and economics and multilateral institutions (Robbins, 2012, p. 20). Analysis at different levels is of high relevance in understanding how power circulates through and mediates relationships and socio-environmental and economic behaviors (Mostafanezhad et al., 2016). Adding the ideas of political ecology to viewing tourism as a geopolitical activity outline the theoretical foundations of this study.

In this study, environment is viewed as an essential component of tourism. It is understood in a broad sense encompassing the natural, social and cultural features as well as economic and political dimensions, since they are all vital in understanding the tourism context. It follows the post-structural discourse, where nature is socially constructed and produced through discourses and social practices (Escobar, 1996). Environmental problems are considered as a complex entity encompassing overlapping ecological, social and economic dimensions.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Qualitative research: Interviews and observation

A qualitative study among the local people in Darién was carried out to explore the different ways in which environmental challenges and power relations have been manifested through tourism. This study is based on altogether 37 semi-structured interviews and participant observation in pursuing to understand how people perceive the factors that have influenced tourism, the role of tourism in addressing environmental issues, and the complex network of stakeholder power relations. Fieldwork also affirms the place-based nature of geopolitical ecology.

In qualitative research reality is understood as a social construct (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), and the aim is to demonstrate the historical and cultural relevance of the phenomena under research (Alasuutari, 2011, p. 244). According to Silverman (1998a, pp. 18-19), qualitative research is not only a set of techniques, but also a theoretically-driven, credible and rigorous enterprise that intends to explain how social phenomena, practices and experience, are constituted in real time. The strength of qualitative research for researchers as well as participants is its ability to focus on actual practice *in situ* (Silverman, 1998b). Qualitative research strives for contextuality, interpretation and understanding of the perspectives of actors. The roots of qualitative research lie in anthropology, and it is characterized by an inclusive *emic* -perspective, where the focus is on what local people think (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Kvale (1996) identifies seven steps in qualitative research: thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying and reporting. In general, qualitative research provides in-depth but poorly generalizable information, which, however, is usually unique (Alasuutari, 2011).

3.1.1 Interview

The purpose of a qualitative research interview is to gather descriptions of the lifeworld of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale, 1983). Interview is a flexible research method suitable for

different research purposes and popular in ethnographic research. It is a time-consuming method at every stage, from planning and framing the questions, finding the interviewees to transcribing the material. Interviews involve direct interaction with the interviewee(s) creating the opportunity to channel data acquisition in the specific situation by for example posing follow-up questions (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2010). The aim of an interview is to understand how individual people experience and make sense of their own lives emphasizing on considering the meanings people attribute to their lives and the processes which operate in a particular social context (Valentine in Flowerdew & Martin, 2005, p. 111). It is worth noting, that "context" itself is by no means a straightforward concept as there is no guarantee that the researcher's sense of context corresponds to the one invoked by participants (Silverman, 1998b). An interview conveys a picture of the interviewee's thoughts, perceptions, experiences and feelings. It is aimed at gathering information and is therefore a pre-planned goal-oriented activity (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2010, pp. 41-42). Both parties of the discussion are active producers of research material (Alasuutari 2011, p. 148). An interview is not an impartial situation as it is more than a spontaneous exchange of opinions and eventually it is the interviewer who defines and is in charge of the structure and purpose of the conversation (Kvale, 1996, p. 6).

Interviews differ in their degree of structuring, that is how closely the questions are formulated and the extent to which the researcher outlines the situation (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2010, p. 43). Semi-structured interview is consisted of an array of themes to be covered and questions related (Kvale 1996, p. 124). In a semi-structured interview the themes and topics are the same for all interviewees, but it does not need to proceed in following an exact pattern. Interviews can also differ depending on the number of people participating in the interview. The material of this research consists of both individual and group interviews. These produce different type of data, which should be considered when interpreting the material. It is argued, that in group interviews the atmosphere can be more relaxed and interaction between people can be more spontaneous, leading to stronger statements than individual interviews (Kvale 1996, p. 101). On the other hand, people may not openly discuss their opinions and the discussion can remain superficial. Group discussions produce various

discourses within which people deal with the issue from different perspectives. (Alasuutari, 2011). Group interviews tend to be more conversational than individual interviews, but produce equally valuable information and provide quick access to information from multiple respondents at the same time. A central disadvantage of group interviews is the dynamic of the group; especially the hierarchy of power can influence who speaks in a group and what is said. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2010, p. 63). However, in the end the quality of the data does not depend on the type of the interview but rather on the questions to which the interpretation of the material seeks to obtain answers (Alasuutari, 2011).

3.1.2 Observation

In the present study, observation was used to complement and support the information gained from the interviews, thus aiming at improving the validity of the research. Observation as method provides information about whether people really act as they say they do. Scientific observation is systematic compared to the observations people make on a daily basis. Often different results are obtained depending on whether we trust what people say, or whether we follow how people actually act. (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006). The advantage of observation is that it provides immediate and direct information about the activities and behavior of individuals, groups and organizations and allows access to the natural environments, where things occur. As with interviews, there are different degrees of observation depending on the extent of its structure and on the role of the researcher. Observation can range from participative to the researcher taking a non-participative observer's role. (ibid.). In this research observation is placed somewhere in between, where the researcher participates in the situation under study but does not actively influence the course of the phenomenon with his/her presence.

3.2 Data collection in the field

Fieldwork for the research was realized between December 2015 and March 2016 during four visits of different lengths to the province of Darién. In total I spent eight months in Panama between October 2015 and May 2016, of which six months doing an internship with the UNDP Small Grants Programme. The concept of the *field* is often considered something that is taken for granted and usually associated with ethnographic anthropological research. It relates with an outdated impression of a fixed place somewhere *out there* where the researcher goes to conduct research (Alasuutari, 2001, p. 83). *The field* is not an unproblematic piece of reality, but a place in constant flux adopting different meanings in time and space. In this study, field is broadly considered as the environment, where the process of observing and collecting data about people, cultures, and natural environments took place.

Total number of interviews	37
Individual	22
Pair	4
Group	11

Table 1: Overview of the interview types.

The data consists of 37 interviews and observation, documented in detailed field notes. In addition, a number of conversations with residents, personnel of non-governmental and community-based organizations and government officials supplement the data. The majority, 22 of the interviews were individual, four interviews were with two people and eleven were conducted in a group. Four of the intended individual interviews ended up being with two people because they occurred in situations where it would have felt unnatural to ask the other person to leave. These include a mother and daughter, a married couple, and members of a community-based organization. These interviews are therefore classified as pair interviews because both persons were actively talking. It is worth noting that five of the group interviews were carried out in different indigenous communities, two in non-indigenous communities, two with CBOs, and two with government agencies.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish and no interpreter was used. Although I speak Spanish fluently, there is still the possibility of linguistic and cultural misinterpretations. Challenges considering language and concepts are always present in interviews because linguistic readiness, communication styles and connotations of words vary. I had planned a preliminary interview guide beforehand but generally interviews proceeded naturally. I made sure all the themes were discussed in each interview at some point. In group interviews, I tried to make sure that all participants had the opportunity to participate in the discussion, but at the same time keep the situation natural without guiding the conversation too much.

21 of all the interviews were recorded. They lasted on average 40 minutes each, the shortest being 10 minutes and longest more than two hours. Although recording interviews has nowadays become relatively normal, I always asked for permission from the interviewees. Recording allows the researcher to concentrate on the interview without unnecessary interruptions caused by taking notes, enabling the mutual engagement in a proper conversation. It produces a more accurate and detailed record of the interview, which facilitates further analysis of the data. In order to avoid making a deal about the taping, I used a phone to record the interviews. This was a natural choice, as many people tend to have their phone at the ready. Interestingly, I noted a difference in people's approach from when I have used a tape-recorder in documenting interviews in some past fieldwork. For interviews that were not recorded, I wrote down key words during the interview and made more detailed notes immediately after the discussions.

Individual interview participants		Number of interviews (total 22)
Sex	Male	18
	Female	4
Age group	20 or under	1
	21-30	5
	31-40	8
	41-50	5
	51 or over	3
Ethnicity	Mestizo	10
	Afro	4
	Indigenous	3
	Other/not specified	5
Occupation	Farmer	1
	Fisher	1
	Guide	2
	Hotel worker	2
	Police	4
	Restaurant worker	1
	Retired	1
	Teacher	1
	Other/not specified	9

Table 2: Background information of the individual interview participants.

The table above shows a narrow overview of the participants of individual interviews. I wanted to cover people who work, or are somehow engaged with touristic activities in order to get more profound information about the environmental problems and power relations related. The range of participants was wide including tourist guides, hotel workers, boatmen, farmers, police, NGO and CBO employees as well as unemployed and retired. What comes to the background information of the interviewees, I ended up not specifically asking people's profession because many earned their livelihood from different activities and had difficulties in specifying their

"occupation". Age wise the majority of the interviewees classified between 31 and 40 ranging from the youngest being 20 to the oldest being over 70. The majority, 18 of the individual interviewees were male and four were female. The gender distribution resulted uneven because men tended to be more available to spontaneous interviews, while women appeared to spend more time at home, for example caring for children. The respondents came from different ethnic backgrounds: mestizo, indigenous, Afros and Colombians. In 22 of the total 37 interviews, the participants had a close relation with touristic activities. I found my interviewees by contacting some of them personally beforehand and others by asking around on site. In general, I had no problem finding interviewees since people were very willing to talk and had time to engage in conversations that went beyond a superficial exchange of ideas.

Interviews were conducted in people's homes; accommodations premises, offices or outside in a tranquil place, although the most ex tempore ones took place in a boat and a *cantina* (local bar). Places visited (see map on p. IV) include Jaqué, Biroquera (Wounaan), Puerto Piña, Metetí, Santa Fé, Nuevo Vigía (Emberá), La Palma, Setegantí, Mogosenega, Garachiné, Sambú, Puerto Indio, La Chunga (Emberá), Taimatí, Cémaco (Wounaan), Yaviza, El Real and Pijibasal (Emberá). Places were selected based on actual touristic activities as well as to cover a geographical area as large as possible considering the accessibility, the cost and time of fieldwork. The time spent on the field was limited and divided between various locations, thus not enabling long-term engagement with the participants. My overall stay in Panama enabled observing tourism and environmental conflicts, not only at a local level, but also at a national level, which helped to connect tourism development in Darién to a broader context.

3.3 Analysis of the data

The research material was first transcribed and then analyzed using qualitative data-driven content analysis, which I considered suitable regarding the aim and purpose of the study, as well as the data gathered. The aim was to develop a functional analytical framework to be able to draw up valid conclusions from the material. In qualitative content analysis the data is organized in such way that the conclusions drawn from it

can be gradually detached from individual persons, events and statements, and transferred to a more general conceptual and theoretical level. Categorization of meanings is useful in structuring and making sense of extensive interview material (Kvale, 1996, pp. 197-199).

Miles and Huberman (1994) describe qualitative content analysis as process involving 1) data reduction, 2) data clustering, and 3) abstraction. First, the transcribed data was reduced by removing those parts that I considered completely irrelevant considering the subject of study. This is a crucial part of the analysis where the researcher needs to be careful in not interpreting the data to meet a possible hypothesis. If I was unsure about whether something was relevant, I left that part for further analysis. After this, the data was classified and coded according to similarities and differences. In classifying and analyzing the data, the focus was on features common to many interviewees. In the end, classification depends always on the typology created by the researcher and the criteria chosen by the researcher (Alasuutari, 2011, p. 120). What kind of interpretation is reached depends on the material but above all on the researcher. Therefore, very different interpretations can be obtained from the same material (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 104).

Pure inductive reasoning is not possible because it is based on the mere description of observations without any preconceptions about the phenomenon under study. Absolutely data-driven research is difficult to carry out simply because the findings are theoretically believed to be generally accepted. No objective observations exist because the concepts and methods used are set by the researcher and thus affect the results. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002, p. 98). Eventually, I analyzed the information relevant to the research and looked for theoretical connections. Direct quotes describing the personal and lived experiences of the interviewees are used to support the findings. They bring out the voice of the interviewees, because it is thought that individuals cannot speak for each other.

4 DARIEN, THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

4.1 Geographical and historical context of Darién

Eastern Panama and northwestern Colombia have been historically referred to as Darién, although the definition has varied through times. The political definition of Darién conflicts with the biogeographic definition, where instead of the actual political boundaries, Darién is understood as a larger area of the isthmus, or extending even as far as northern Ecuador. The area of Darién is also often referred to as the Darién Gap¹, the hardly accessible forest area between Panama and Colombia, where the Pan-American Highway running from Alaska to Patagonia makes its only break separating Central and North America from South America.

This research focuses on which today is defined the Darién province of Panama, established in 1922². It is the largest province in the country with an area of approximately 11 893 km², located in the eastern end of Panama. In the south, Darién borders with the Pacific Ocean and Colombia, in the north with the province of Panama and the indigenous Comarca Guna Yala, in the east with Colombia, and the west with the Pacific Ocean. Darién province is divided into two districts, Chepigana and Pinogana, and 25 *corregimientos*. The province includes two indigenous Emberá-Wounaan³ territories (in Spanish *comarca*) declared by the Government of Panama in 1983, and the Guna indigenous territory of Wargandí, established in 2000. The capital of Darién is La Palma. Other bigger towns include Metetí, Yaviza, El Real and Santa Fé.

The natural landscape in Darién is diverse with tropical forest, mountains, mangroves, rivers, beaches, and rich endemic flora and fauna. Darién is unique in terms of biodiversity, because it holds the largest remaining area of untouched forest in Central America functioning as a natural boundary between Central and South America. The

¹ In Spanish *Tapón de Darién*, term coined by Panamanian Tomás Guardia (Miller, 2014).

² Despite focusing on the Darién province of Panama, the political boundary may not be of significance especially for indigenous groups residing in the area.

³ The Emberá and Wounaan are two different indigenous groups, although historically both were known as *Chocó*.

province is part of the Chocó-Darién eco region, which is included in the list of the 25 places in the world recognized as "biodiversity hotspots" by Conservation International (Myers et al., 2000). The coastline of Darién is divided into the Pacific littoral zone and the Gulf of San Miguel, which is a large area consisting of a complex system of rivers, deltas, mudflats, freshwater wetlands and extensive mangroves (Suman, 2007b). The highest point is *cerro Tacarcuna*, reaching about 2000 meters. Currently Darién has six protected areas, including the Darién National Park extending across 579,000 hectares. It is the largest protected area in the country, and among the most valuable protected areas in Central America encompassing a large variety of coastal, lowland and mountain ecosystems and habitats. The park was established in 1980, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981, and a Biosphere Reserve in 1983 (UNESCO, 2020). Other protected areas include Punta Patiño Natural Reserve, where the 30,290 hectares of mangrove forests and tropical humid forests were listed as a Ramsar Wetland Site in 1993; the Forestal Reserves of Canglón and Serranía de Darién; the Hydrological Reserve Filo del Tallo; and the Hydrological protection zone of Tapagara (MIAMBIENTE, 2016).



Figure 2: The capital of Darién, La Palma.
Photo by Maija Meri

Darién is culturally and ethnically heterogeneous. It is the most sparsely populated part of Panama, although the area has experienced steady growth in the number of inhabitants during the last 50 years. In 1990, Darién had a population of 35 862, increasing to 40 284 in 2000, and 48 378 in 2010. For this year, 2020, the estimated number of people is expected to increase up to 57 818⁴. The population density has grown from 3 inhabitants per km² in 1990 to its current 50 inhabitants per km². Still, only 1,5% of the country's total population live in Darién and approximately nine out of ten of the inhabitants reside in rural areas (INEC, 2014). Darién has attracted a lot of migrants from the more densely populated interior provinces, Veraguas, Herrera, Los Santos and Chiriquí, in search of new farmland, which has played central part in the growth of population. At the same time, the number of emigrants from Darién to other parts of the country has been high, thus approximately every second person originally from Darién resides in another province (INEC, 2014). The population is composed of *latinos* or *mestizos*, afro-descendants and indigenous groups: Emberá, Wounaan and Guna. The majority of the population is concentrated in small towns and communities linked by roads and waterways. The principal income sources in the province are stock raising, agriculture, fishery and timber industry. When looking at all social indicators, Darién is below the national average. Poverty is frequent, especially among coastal and rural residents and lack of infrastructure (electricity, potable water, sanitary systems) is common.

Originally, the area of Darién-Chocó ⁵ was inhabited by indigenous people documented as *cueva*, who were eradicated by the Spanish by the mid 1500s. The colonial era of the region was marked by riches and violence: gold was extracted and many indigenous people were killed intentionally as well as because of diseases. Darién lost prominence, when the locus of colonial activity moved towards the west to the overland isthmian transit route around Panama City. (Velásquez Runk, 2015). There were few attempts to build a canal through Darién, which in the end were abandoned because of the topography, moving the canal endeavors to the center of

⁴ The newest extensive population census is being carried out during the ongoing year, 2020.

⁵ Chocó is the Colombian province bordering Darién

the country. In the early 1900s Darién was again left to the periphery with the downfall of the Spanish empire, Panama's independence from Colombia in 1903 and the beginning of operation of the Panama Canal in 1914 (ibid.).

Until 1960, Darién remained isolated from the rest of the country and the only means of transportation to the region were boat or small plane. Then, the government began development plans for the area, which permanently altered the character of Darién. New canal plans emerged as the previous canal in the center of the country had become too small for bigger ships. The possible effects of a new sea-level canal promoted scientific study in Eastern Panama, because the intention was to use of nuclear explosives in its excavation. Eventually the project was abandoned in 1970 due to environmental reasons. (Covich, 2015; Miller, 2014). The construction of the Pan-American Highway towards the east from Chepo initiated in the late 1970s, and was completed all the way to the town of Yaviza in the mid-1980s. This shortened the Darién Gap between Panama and Colombia to its current 106-kilometer expanse, changing the access, economy and demography of the area. The original idea was to complete the Highway all the way to Colombia, but the project was officially stopped in 1975 by a lawsuit because of the fear of the spread of Colombia's hoof-and-mouth disease. The United States, who was funding the project lost its interests in Darién and returned to central Panama's Canal Zone (Miller, 2014). The United States had a firm position in the country during 1977-1999 because of the joint control of the Panama Canal. The US occupation was openly justified by geopolitical ideology.

The development of roads during the last 40 years has facilitated accessibility, thus extending logging and agricultural frontiers, and bringing about big changes in land use and the exploitation of natural resources. During the 1980s, agriculture was heavily affected in the country, when the government ended the program of subsidies and price controls for agricultural products and finished its crop-purchasing programs. Darién was hit hard because of the high production costs and weak transportation network of the area. In addition, at the same time the Black Sigatoka fungus disease destroyed 75% of the province's plantain cultivations worsening the economic situation. (Suman, 2007b). In the mid 1990s, Darién caught more international

attention and significant amount of foreign development and conservation funding was directed to the region, focusing on both fixing the Pan-American Highway and forest conservation (Velásquez Runk et al., 2007).

Security has been an issue in the area and due to the historical lack of attention from the Panamanian government institutions. Darién has experienced political violence from neighboring Colombia and served as a route for trafficking drugs, arms and people. The difficult environment has favored illegal action and provided hideouts for paramilitary and guerilla camps. (Suman, 2007a; Suman, 2007b; Velásquez Runk, 2015). Despite the hazards, Darién has up to date been used by immigrants from all over the world as a route towards North America. During the past years the safety situation has improved and the Panamanian National Border Service (Servicio Nacional de Fronteras [SENAFRONT]), has wide presence throughout the province. It can be argued, that eventually Darién's modernization became too successful. The current period emphasizes on Darién as a threatened area with the need for environmental conservation and strengthened governance (Velásquez Runk, 2015).

4.2 Tourism in Darién

Several news articles have stated the tourism potential and the "opening" of Darién for tourists (BBC Mundo, 2014; La Estrella de Panamá, 2009; La Prensa, 2006; Revista MIA, 2016). Darién has been referred to as an ecotourism paradise (Suman, 2007b), and promises for the development of tourism and attracting investor interest have been discussed periodically. Although the region has attracted explorers and scientists already for centuries, the history of tourism is rather simplistic. Crossing the Darién Gap has been more noted than referring to Darién as such as a destination. Ironically, there has never been such Gap for the locals, and indigenous people have been traversing the region for centuries with canoes and by trails (Miller, 2014). By the 1950s, attempts to cross the Darién Gap began to gain popularity, as "getting through was now more important than getting there" (Miller, 2014). Crossing the Gap was "part of a transition to the conquest of difficult linear spaces rather than that of mere places" (ibid.). Along with the rise of the automotive industry and car travel, albeit the

roadless terrain, several vehicle expeditions took place after the 1960s attempting to cross the Gap. However, the first (and last) successful entirely overland car expedition did not occur until 1987, taking 741 travel days and around 200 kilometers (Miller, 2014).

For a long time, the tourism dialogue in Darién revolved around the Pan-American Highway construction plans. Tourism was a central argument for those in favor of completing the road, as it was expected to bring prosperity to the area. It was anticipated to capture both commercial and cultural exchange, and bind the Americas together ameliorating the inter-American relations (Miller, 2014). Contradictory arguments and the first ecological concerns of the possible completion of the Highway were published in 1973 by a team of scientists, who focused on Darién as an area rather than an obstacle that needed to be crossed and tamed (ibid.).

Nowadays, tourism remains limited and tourism infrastructure is minimal. It has been estimated that approximately 1000 tourists visit the province each year (Suman, 2007b) but no official statistics exist. The number of visitors has been estimated to have remained relatively steady during the last ten years, and the province has occupied only a very slight part of the whole tourism market in Panama. According to the National Tourism Authority of Panama (Autoridad de Turismo de Panamá [ATP]), formerly known as the Panamanian Tourist Institute (Instituto Panameño de Turismo [IPAT], 2008), the share of overnight stays in Darién compared to the whole country has been around 1% since 2008, but is estimated to somewhat increase by 2020. The majority of tourists are foreign, and only few nationals visit the area for tourism purposes. The tourism offer, if simplified, is either high-end or community-based, and travelling to Darién is relatively expensive and time-consuming. Most popular activities in Darién include hiking, bird watching, fishing, boat trips in the mangroves, and cultural visits to indigenous Emberá and Wounaan villages. Suitable places for surfing and diving exist, but require arrangements and having your own equipment. There are also possibilities for volunteering with sea turtles. Places of cultural-historical interest include for example the ruins of the Espiritu Santo gold mine in the area of Cana, and the forts of San Lorenzo and San Carlos near La Palma.

The more upmarket lodges are specialized in sport fishing, bird watching, and other nature- and culture-related activities. They make pre-organized package tours and many have their established clientele coming mostly from North America or Europe. A few indigenous communities have engaged in community-based tourism but the interest towards this type of activity is growing. There is supply of hotels in major population centers, but smaller places lack places for staying overnight. The Association of Environmental Conservation of Panama (Asociación de Conservación de la Naturaleza de Panamá [ANCON]) and some private tour agencies have offered multiple day organized visits to Darién. Also, some international cruises have irregularly visited the Gulf of San Miguel organizing short onshore excursions for passengers.

When observing tourism development from a wider perspective, Panama has led the growth in international tourist arrivals in Central America (WTTC, 2015; UNWTC, 2019). Panama is geographically located in one of the most biodiverse regions in the world, but threats for the country's biodiversity have increased (Vega Abad & Banfield, 2013; ANAM, 2014; CBD, 2014). Panama's economic growth has showed in the exploitation of the country's natural resources, which began in the 1990s with the construction of infrastructure megaprojects such as the expressways leading to the capital (Vega Abad & Banfield, 2013). The expansion of the Panama Canal was inaugurated in June 2016 increasing the number of the vessels and enabling bigger ships to cross the isthmus. Other construction projects include for example the new metro lines, new highways and the expansion of the airport. The direct contribution of travel and tourism to the country's GDP is forecast to keep raising by the year 2025, reflecting the economic activity generated by industries like hotels, travel agents, airlines and other passenger transportation services (WTTC, 2015).

The government's tendency of favoring neoliberal economic development, such as supporting market economies and integration, decentralization of the state, and promotion of individualism, has led to a number of policy changes for rights to land and environment (Velásquez Runk, 2012). Coastal property used to be public until 2009, when the government passed a law enabling the titling on beachfront property.

This boomed the country's coastal real estate market and drove residents to claim against the loss of their access to the beach (Velásquez Runk, 2012). Destruction of natural resources has reached remarkable levels as the idea of sustainable development and the environmental perspective have largely been ignored by the country's main economic actors (Vega Abad & Banfield, 2013). Nevertheless, there exists a Master Plan for Sustainable Tourism in the country (ATP, 2008, 2020), with the objectives to generate economic and social wealth through the development of domestic and international tourism; distribute and decentralize the socio-economic development and generate employment opportunities; and position tourism as a tool for sustainable social, environmental and economic development in specific destinations as well as in the country as a whole.

On a national level, little concrete effort has been put on tourism development in Darién, although the government has named parts of the province as tourism development zones already almost a decade ago (Suman, 2007b). The development of tourism for example in indigenous communities has been mainly financed by NGOs and international institutions. In 2002, a coastal management plan funded by the Inter-American Development Bank was elaborated for the Gulf of San Miguel, including a dimension of ecotourism, where the reasons for Darién's tourism potential were identified as: 1) high biodiversity, 2) the two national parks (Darién National Park in Panama and Los Katios National Park in Colombia, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site), 3) scenic coastal areas, 4) extensive mangrove, 5) rich marine resources, 6) internationally recognized bird species, 7) cultural diversity, and 8) archeological sites. Correspondingly, priority obstacles for tourism development were considered the lack of identification of potential eco-tourism sites, absence of trained human resources in the eco-tourism field, lack of tourism infrastructure, and shortage of established limits and controls for eco-tourism activities (Suman, 2007b). Careful development of sustainable ecotourism activities was suggested to provide alternatives for people in coastal villages without having adverse impacts on the social structure or the environment. Also, opportunities for small hotels, restaurants, transportation services, and nature guides were seen existing (ibid.).

4.3 The many faces of Darién

Darién is often characterized as an area of contrasts. Literature, images, maps and media have unambiguously illustrated Darién through two specific characters: it's volatile reputation and it's cultural and natural richness. Imagery, texts and discourses produce an *imaginative geography* (Said, 1978), providing insightful evidence of how space is socially constructed, and how everyday representations of space and place are created. Velásquez Runk (2015) has examined representations of Darién from centuries, concluding that the omnipresent image of wild Darién still strongly persists, having long-lasting sociopolitical and environmental effects. It has resulted in a normalization of a discourse that the region is never sufficient unto itself, thereby provoking and justifying intervention by outsiders. Darién's imaginative geography has mainly derived from superficial reading of history, but even much of the more recent work has not resisted recreating the same kind of stereotypical and largely false image of Darién (Velásquez Runk, 2015).

The tourism context provides apt examples about how Darién is pictured: *The world's most dangerous jungle; largely untouched by the modern world; dangerous obsession for generations of travelers. Darién has an almost mythical quality to it; it's got a romanticism. Darién offers opportunities for intrepid travelers to discover something truly wild. Darién is the place where primeval meets the present; with scenery nearly unaltered from one million years ago; with immense beauty and incredible bounty; and where the natural world is raw and the indigenous people real. There are few places on Earth like the Darién. It is Panama's – and by some measure, the world's – last frontier.* These are just some of the many examples of how Darién is described. As the quotes point out, Darién has adopted a certain type of destination image, which is actively reproduced. Traveling to *exotic* places has been in the heart of tourism because tourism is performed in opposition to everyday life. The environments that tourists visit are subject to what Urry (1990) has interpreted as "*the tourist gaze*", making a difference between the ordinary, one's normal place of residence or work, and the extraordinary, the object of the tourist gaze.

Although the narrative of Darién as a dangerous and unstable region still persists and goes way beyond tourism, especially research literature has slowly replaced this image emphasizing Darién as a biodiverse region with urgent need of conservation efforts (Velásquez Runk, 2015). The same cannot be said about media, as a recent article of the Finnish main newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat* (2019), described Darién as "the most dangerous place in the Western Hemisphere" and "a dangerous jungle infested with poisonous animals and armed forces", falling in the trap of promoting the centuries old tendency of exoticization, sensationalization and exaggeration.

Informed decision-making concerning the political, economic, and environmental future of the region have continually been defeated from one perspective to another due to a lack of even a basic understanding of how the cultural and natural landscapes of Darién have been undergoing rapid change (Herlihy, 2003). It is clear that the region can no longer be called as periphery, since Darién has become more and more integrated to the national and international economies.



Figure 3: Street art in La Palma describing different features of Darién.
Photo by Maija Meri

5 TOURISM, ENVIRONMENT AND POWER RELATIONS IN DARIEN

5.1 Tourism limiting factors

This section discusses the main factors that were considered having influenced tourism in Darién. These include the security situation, difficult accessibility and weak infrastructure; poor education, skills and knowledge; and the lack of participation and motivation. The results revealed, that in fact many of these factors are of relevance from the standpoint of geopolitical ecology in the sense that they result from power relations, which directly or indirectly influence in shaping the environment. As a frontier area, Darién is subject to many underlying geopolitical questions that have arisen from time to time, and are likely to emerge also in the future. National borders and their associated security, economic and sociocultural mechanisms can have implications for cross-border development in tourism (Saarinen, 2018).

5.1.1 Security situation

Security-related issues have played central part in limiting tourism in Darién. Roughly the period of 2000-2010 was characterized by the presence of Colombian guerilla and problems related to drug trafficking. Security measures were tightened and SENA FRONT was established in 2008. Checkpoints were spread out throughout the province to maintain control of the frontier with Colombia. Parts of Darién were declared as a so-called red zone, *zona roja*, referring to an area to be avoided due to high level of insecurity and illegal activities. In addition, incidents with wild animals, the dangerous terrain, and poor communication opportunities in case of emergency highlighted the difficult circumstances of the area. The tightened security measures had contradictory outcomes for locals as well as for tourism, just when tourism had slowly begun to gain more importance. A range of long-lasting issues affecting everyday life followed from the weakened security situation as described by a farmer in the coastal town of Jaqué:

"I know that security is important in the towns, I fought for that security and was aware that it was important to have the police in the district, to guarantee the safety of those who went to the river. I was convinced that there should be a police checkpoint at the frontier, we fought

for that. We succeeded, but they put the checkpoint where they wanted to put it because they are the ones who are in charge of the security. They closed the border, they closed it, coexistence between the people, it was over. We could no longer go there as we did freely (...) We received benefits from our brother country Colombia in commercial matters, and also vice versa, goods were exported from here, they left money here and we left money there. We are talking about more than 10 years, but then it ended. They bought bananas, they bought coconuts, we brought meat from there. But not anymore, it was completely forbidden (...) And that does not mean that we do not agree on the presence of the police, we strongly agree because we need it. But they cannot be extremists. They say that this is a free sovereign country, it means that you can travel freely, but that they condition your freedom of transit, that is not sovereign, they condition it. It is ok that you are identified, but that they take away your passport. If you go with this concept further and begin to tell your friends what happens, and if they want to come to see the wonders of Jaqué, when they hear what's going on here they don't want to come anymore." (24JQG)

Accessibility was restricted in the name of people's personal safety, and the role of the police as an authority became highlighted. Many locals acknowledged the importance of security and agreed to the increased presence of the police. Still, they strongly disagreed with the ways in which security measures were implemented, and to the extent to which it affected everyday life, specifically by limiting people's freedom of movement. Restricting accessibility and the sudden closure of State borders was a shock to the local economy as well as for social relations because Darién has a lot of migrants from Colombia. Employment opportunities decreased as reciprocal trade between the countries came to an end. This had impacts especially in the more remote coastal area, which is not connected by a road network. Conditioning the freedom of movement of people damaged the image of Panama as free and sovereign country. Locals were not included in decision-making reflecting the lack of communication and inequality between locals and authorities. Negative attitudes and strong distrust towards officials was expressed as the interviewee blamed the police for circumventing the rules for their own interest. All this led to Darién gaining bad reputation.

Although the security situation has clearly improved since the 2000s, the unclear security status, inconsistency in security measures, and lack of accurate information was reflected in the interviews and proved also evident throughout the fieldwork period. Although legally no permission was needed to circulate within national territory, SENAFRONT had still been asking for written permits or so-called notifications from visitors in order to enter the province. The stigma of being called a

red zone was blamed on the government and persisted strong in people's minds. Colombian armed conflict was seen as the main reason behind the weakened security situation. Many interviewees were uncertain about the actual circumstances. Some believed that there were still red zones in Darién while others claimed that there had never even been such. Government authorities were equally confused about the current situation as illustrated in a conversation with a person working for the National Environmental Authority, (Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente [ANAM]):

"I don't know how is it with SENAFRONT. The last time I was there (...) I couldn't pass because SENAFRONT told me no, it's a red zone. I never understood, the last time we had a meeting they said no, it's a red zone, you can't bring more tourists. We are talking 4 years ago."
(43MEGT)

Even SENAFRONT officers themselves claimed different information. One said that currently there were no restricted areas, and that after year 2012 no official permission had been required to enter the province. Another officer told that until year 2014 such a written permit was needed. A third officer admitted that he did not have any knowledge about the official security measures. According to a chief officer interviewed in Panama City, armed groups were officially eliminated from national territory in year 2012. In an article by the local newspaper from 2008, the National Police neglected Darién being a red zone but recommended not to tour the area without police escort (La Prensa, 2008). According to my observations, the actions of SENAFRONT at the field did not speak in favor that movement would no longer be restricted.

Restricting people's freedom of movement had vast consequences in Darién. In addition to hindering the everyday life of locals, limiting accessibility complicated tourism and cut down tourism-related activities in many communities. SENAFRONT has maintained strict control in regard to foreigners accessing Darién. Until 2013, in order to be allowed to enter the province, any foreigner had to request for a special permit beforehand from the SENAFRONT office in Panama City. Without being able to present such permit on paper at the frontier of the province, the border officers could turn the person back. Even tour operators had struggled to get the adequate papers

let alone people travelling individually. Although officially any special permit was supposedly no longer required, heavy control at several checkpoints was still common.

My personal experiences from the province border affirm the statements of the interviewees. Each time I entered the province by car I got pulled over and was asked to get off the vehicle. I was requested to show my passport and interrogated about my motives of going to Darién. Sometimes I was asked to write my personal information on a piece of paper, which by no means appeared official. Often a picture was taken of my passport. This undoubtedly raised further questions about the possibility of my personal details falling into wrong hands. The car was inspected and sometimes luggage was searched. When I travelled to Jaqué by plane, I went directly to my lodging. Soon a police officer appeared at the door and stated in a slightly annoyed tone that I should have come to report myself to the police post immediately after arriving. Especially interviewees working with tourists complained about the course of action of the border police. The disorder had caused irritation, loss of money, and loss of time for both tourists and the tourism employees. Tourists had been turned back even when accompanied by a guide, as described by an employee of ANAM:

"They [tour agency] take people there, there is a path. They had sold a package worth 400 dollars [USD] a day because they come to see this bird, and sometimes SENAFRONT would not let them pass (...) Because here the people of SENAFRONT ask for a permit just to go over there, and if you mention that you are going to Yaviza or elsewhere, 'Did you ask for a permission to go'. The tourist gets scared and says we rather turn back." (43MEGT)

These kinds of arbitrary restrictions were reported common. As a visitor it caused a feeling of not being welcomed and put the guide and the company in an awkward position because they could not provide the service that they had promised.

Indigenous people in particular were vulnerable to restrictions of movement because their communities are normally located in more remote areas. For the indigenous people borders have historically had little importance because they have a long history of living in the area before the current borders were established. Two interviewees from different communities commented that tourists used to come and visit the

communities to buy traditional handicrafts and get acquainted with the culture, but during the last five years SENAFRONT had no longer allowed tourists to come. Because of the restrictions, tour operators were forced to reduce visits to indigenous communities. This was a huge setback because selling handicrafts had been an additional income source in many communities, and especially important for the indigenous women. Many communities lack the necessary contacts to send their crafts for sale to the capital, or alternatively intermediaries have tried to buy products at low price and then resell them expensive in Panama City. The arbitrariness of the restrictions was indicated by the fact that despite all the warnings, even if you went somewhere without letting the police know, it would practically not lead to any consequences. On interviewee thought that the tourist status provided a certain type of safeguard because tourists had the legal right to stay in the area. The interviewee had for example once advised a foreign friend to tell the police that the person was on holidays instead of telling that in reality the purpose of the visit was to make a report. The person considered in this case legitimate not telling the truth.

On the other hand, limiting accessibility for tourists was seen positive and justified in some occasions, as contemplated by two interviewees:

"When a visitor comes, he will say where he is going and they can monitor him. But it is logical that I also see it from the point of view of the visitor's safety. If you go to Yaviza and to that area it is not highly recommended to walk alone. For me it seems good that they restrict at least that area, and specific areas even a little more. Because the truth is that if something happens to any of the visitors it would do us a lot of damage and also to Darién in general." (32SFST)

"The tourist who comes needs a guide, because the tourist can end up somewhere and if something happens, also the community can get into trouble. For example, if a visitor goes for a walk alone without a guide, sometimes they want to go alone, and if something happens the community will have problems because of letting the visitor go without a guide." (39LCGT).

The importance of having a guide was emphasized in particular by those who worked closely with tourists. In the background was the sense of responsibility and the fear that in the case something happened to someone, it would cause much harm not only to the specific community, but to whole Darién. In this context, control and the operation of SENAFRONT gathering detailed visitor information gained more understanding. Limiting accessibility has in part benefitted tourist operators. They

have been at an advantage because individual travelers have been few, and the usual way of visiting Darién has been accompanied by a guide. Because safety and reputation have improved, an increasing amount of people come to visit Darién on their own. This could lead to diminished demand and less work, as feared by a tour guide.

The precarious history has prompted Darién gaining a dangerous reputation on a national as well as international level. Although insecurity was mostly restricted to certain areas, the image of the whole province was severely affected. For example, in its travel announcement, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland recommends avoiding unnecessary travel to Darién, especially to the border area between Panama and Colombia. According to the official travel warning violence, kidnappings and murders related to drug trafficking and other crimes occur in Darién, especially in the area between the town of Yaviza and the border. It is suggested to travel to the province only by air, and only take part in visits organized by trusted tour operators. Traveling by land and inland waterway between the Panama and Colombia border areas is very risky. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2020). The persisting reputation of Darién was reflected in the majority of the interviews. Political propaganda from behalf of the government, media representations, the fact of being a border zone and the extreme security measures were seen as main causes behind the reproduction of the bad image:

"The police, the armed police force, they made a combination of damaging the image of the town. As if the the guerrilla were here. All that stuff. Who wants to go to a red zone as a tourist."
(24JQG)

Especially the impression of a red zone was perceived stigmatizing and worsening the situation. Although locals were well aware of the bad reputation, they were so used to it that their attitude was fairly indifferent. A hotel employee from Metetí was really surprised when the bad reputation of Darién has concretized to him:

"I think the bad reputation on the international level stems from being frontier with Colombia. Once, I met a person from an exchange program and among the things that are forbidden is to come to Darién, they forbid them to come to Darién. I didn't know that, it surprised me a lot when a friend who was from that program said that in the contract they actually forbid it. I

mean, it's like nobody pays attention to it, but it was not until then that I heard about it. But that's the way it is. I imagine that any foreigner who would like to come here has heard those rumors. The reputation is bad for no reason." (27MEST)

As contemplated by the interviewees, they had heavy doubts about tourists wanting to visit an area with such reputation. There is a clear paradox between the insecure reputation of Darién and the reality perceived by locals. Incidents related to armed conflict and drug trafficking have occurred mainly in remote areas at a distance from population centers. For example, police operations that have taken place in the maritime area have never showed up to the locals, and they have only heard about them from the news. The feeling of safety was strong among locals and none of the interviewees expressed feeling unsafe. In fact, many interviewees stated safety as their favorite characteristics in Darién as described by one interviewee:

"Security is my favorite aspect here, it is totally safe. I live in Panama [City] and obviously there one always needs to be worried about the belongings and stuff. And here, when I come I am totally calm, and I know that nothing is going to happen, the cars are out there all night and that kind of things don't happen. I feel very safe, there is no robbery, there is nothing like that. The reputation is bad for no reason (...) The truth is that when I was a child, I grew up here and one always played pretending that there were guerrillas. But in reality, it has never occurred that the guerrillas would have arrived or something like that. Because it is true that the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] has a settlement in the jungle but they technically do not come to the Panamanian territory, they do not come to the national territory, so they do not influence here, they have no power over here. And also, the border is well guarded by a special border police. And that's why there is no danger, at least I have never felt threatened nor have I ever felt fear or danger. They are just things that we played when we were children that the guerrillas take you but nothing has really happened." (27MEST)

The comment reflects how already children have grown up with narratives of the guerilla. Possible problems were believed to stay on the Colombian side and the police was trusted to keep guard over the frontier. Several interviewees mentioned that nationals from Panama City and elsewhere frequently asked about the guerilla, reflecting that they had no conception about the reality. It had resulted difficult to recruit for example teachers to Darién, because the area was generally believed to be dangerous among nationals.

The effects of Darién's unsafe history have continued to date. From a tourism perspective, this has caused diminution of the number of visitors, which has then affected the employment and income of locals. It has also led to inequality between

different tourism actors. Accessibility remains restricted and no clear and unified protocol of action exists for visitors entering Darién. Although security measures were considered exaggerated, on the other hand the augment of tourism would require more attention on security. The confusing security situation has in part enabled the misuse of natural resources, because putting effort to controlling illegal ecological activities has been overshadowed by tackling other aspects.

5.1.2 Accessibility and infrastructure

In addition to intentionally restricting accessibility, also accessibility due to the geographical location of Darién has limited tourism, along with poor infrastructure. Darién is accessible by land, water and air, but public transport options are scarce and travel in general requires time. By land, the distance from Panama City to Yaviza is around 260 kilometers, which at the time of fieldwork took by car around 4 hours, depending on the traffic and the construction work. By public transportation the trip could easily take almost the double. The Pan-American Highway is the main road and only road leading to Darién from Panama City. Construction near the road has been brisk while more remote parts have remained more untouched. Most of the tourism potential is considered to be in the coastal areas and in the rainforest, far from the road in the less accessible places. As argued by one interviewee, there is nothing to see around the road, the touristy part is on the coast.

Flying is the easiest way to get to the coast. At the time of fieldwork, *Air Panama* had regular flights from Panama City to Jaqué and Puerto Piña around twice a week, but the planes were small and could accommodate hardly even ten passengers. Occasional charter flights took passengers to the resort in Puerto Piña. Before, there were two airline companies and more flights to more destinations, but now flights were scarce and needed to be normally booked well in advance. Small airstrips exist in different parts of the province but most of them are rarely used. Some tour agencies and lodges could arrange private air transport according to demand. A cargo ferry was running from Panama City to the coastal town of Jaqué and back around every two weeks. It had no fixed schedule and the trip took around 15 hours. Also, the sea can be rough

depending on the season. Access to many coastal areas depends on tide, which on the Pacific side of Panama can at best reach up to approximately 6 meters high. This complicates access and requires planning in advance. Within Darién, water transport along rivers is a common form of travel. Location by a waterway was considered an advantage in terms of tourism because it enables various activities such as fishing. In general, water travel within Darién is expensive, especially if you need a private ride.



*Figure 4: Air travel in Darién.
Photo by Maija Meri*



*Figure 5: Cargo vessel running between
Panama City and Jaqué.
Photo by Maija Meri*



*Figure 6: Dugout canoes used to navigate the waterways.
Photo by Maija Meri*

Many indigenous communities can only be reached by foot, and weather conditions especially during heavy rain affect accessibility. One interviewee expressed frustration that the other day they had walked around three hours one way from the community to Puerto Piña to sell their handicrafts for tourists and in the end got nothing sold. Since water transport is expensive and gasoline not always available, the lack money can also prevent people from travelling. The difficulty of moving around faced by locals as well as tourists was highlighted especially by people living in areas beyond the reach of the road network:

"It is necessary to improve transport here, there should be more airplanes and special vessels, such as a cruise from Panama City to the Gulf of San Miguel, to use ferries, so that people can come here. Once, a tourist came here who was first sent to La Palma and from La Palma it is a mess and there is no boat. Another airline, because to go from here to La Palma it is not possible to go when you want, but you have to search, there are no fixed days, there are no schedules. So, more transport options to different places, like Garachiné, La Palma. Because if a tourist comes who wants to go to Garachiné right now, it is not possible, or to Sambú, it is not possible." (15JQG)

Challenging connections from one place to another makes moving around difficult. It requires asking around, negotiating prices, making back up plans, and a lot of patience. Interviewees claimed that travelling to Darién used to be more effortless when there were more flights. The high hopes for tourism development took a turn as the number of tourists fell because visitors did not want to spend so much time on getting to Darién by land. Many interviewees resented the decline of flights because tourism in many places relied largely on air travel. An indigenous man explained that since, they had been struggling to get clients through tour operators because people kept asking for non-existing flight options. Collaboration with agencies based in Panama City had become complicated because the agencies needed to come up with other alternatives and frame their services according to demand.

The construction and improvement of roads has been a reason behind the decline of air travel. New roads have driven locals to travel by land because of the lower cost, as explained by a man from La Palma:

"There are no flights to La Palma because it is expensive but to Jaqué there are, although it costs more. But there are no options, the boat does run but the tide (...) The planes occasionally

come here but everyone travels by road. Before we used to travel by plane. But when the road came no one did anymore, so that's why planes don't come here."(36LPST).

Although accessibility by land had improved, it had worsened connections to more remote places. An interviewee from Metetí suggested that from a tourism perspective, instead of considering the accessibility negatively, it could be viewed as an advantage. Especially water travel, for instance the crossing from Puerto Quimba to La Palma, should be commercialized as part of the tourist experience. Something that people felt happy about was, that after many years of pause cruise tourism showed signs of becoming livelier. International cruises used to stop in the Gulf of San Miguel and make short visits to indigenous communities, and also to La Palma. This brought hope for communities who had already for long suffered from the reduction of tourists. New ideas were being developed by locals to enhance cruise tourism.

Improving accessibility could also cause loss of the feeling of authenticity among visitors because Darién is still somewhat perceived as an exotic destination. A person working with community projects was skeptical about the increase of tourism specifically in indigenous communities:

"What happens is that all those communities have their peak when everyone goes and then there are many people. But if there are many people then people say 'oh well too many people, it is too exploited', as they have that ideal of going to a pristine place where there is no one else, and you arrive and find three other groups of gringos [name used in general for foreigners]." (29MES)

Although all the communities visited during fieldwork hoped for more visitors to come, there exists the possibility of becoming too exploited. As expressed by the interviewee, it could possibly cause loss of interest among visitors looking for alternative experiences. The question of authenticity in general was brought up in a few conversations with indigenous people. Disappearance of the traditional culture, such as language, wearing different clothes, and changes in the traditional way of building houses, was considered a possible factor in the reduction of tourism. Nowadays, there are also places closer to the capital for tourists to explore the indigenous culture. Revitalization of traditions was seen important but challenging because it divided opinions within the communities.

Extending the road network brought about contradicting views. While others thought it would be useful to have a road connection for example to the Pacific coast, others were afraid about the possible consequences it would have. Past experiences have showed that building a road has changed the whole dynamic of moving around and altered the environment. In three different communities visited, a road access had been built recently. Instead of being accessible only by water and depending on tide, the road had brought about a huge change, which people viewed only positively. However, it was not just about being accessible by road if there was no possibility of taking advantage of it, as explained by a woman from an indigenous village by the Gulf of San Miguel:

"That road could benefit the community right now but none of us from this community has the resources to purchase a truck or a small pickup to transport cargo. It would be much better. That would benefit us a lot, a lot, to export our products. For example, groceries, places that are very difficult to access, here one can only move on the basis of the tide, if there is no tide you cannot leave. Look, I sent someone to get chicken for you but there was no chicken, and look what I invented to cook instead." (41CMG)

At least for the moment the community could not make use of the new access because they did not have the resources to obtain a vehicle. The interviewee felt sorry that she had not been able to get the chicken that she wanted to cook for me, reflecting the complexity of living according to the tide. Getting their own products for sale more easily would facilitate trade and improve people's quality of life.

A key question relative to the dynamic of the whole province, the whole country and beyond is the Pan-American Highway and its future. The ongoing improvement of the current stretch of the Pan-American Highway was seen good and necessary because it would reduce travel time to the capital. Lack of investment from behalf of the government and the local sector were considered main reasons why it had not been fixed already a lot earlier. A bigger question was the construction of the missing section between Panama and Colombia, which caused mixed feelings among interviewees. While others believed it would never take place, the majority saw the completion of the land connection inevitable and eventually evident. It was considered a multinational question with pressure in both ways:

"Every town is condemned to development, there are many projects to open a highway with Colombia. I think it would have a great impact on this area because it would be like the entrance to the country from all of South America. Because the road comes all the way from the United States, from Central America but ends in Yaviza, there is no more road. If a connection is made, people could go from the North to the South of the continent. But now they cannot because the highway ends in Yaviza. If they opened the highway it would be like something that cannot be predicted. It would be an impact that can be good but it can also be a bit negative, but it will definitely develop over time." (27MEST)

"The most interested is the Colombian government, the Panamanian government not so much. The Panamanian puts a lot of pressure against, but suddenly at some point it has to happen, it would give a lot of life to Darién. Companies would begin to arrive from the Colombian and the Panamanian side, in the good and in the bad. Development always brings about bad things and good things. The only bad thing is that we are going to lose the peace and tranquility that we have now, good people and bad people will enter without control. With the highway there will be a need for more control and for increased police presence. Because the border with Costa Rica is also difficult, a lot of traffic passes through. So, the peace that one has here will no longer exist." (34LPS)

It could be understood from the discussions, that opinions of the locals would anyhow not be heard in the question. Another interviewee was still more optimistic about the possibility of influencing in decision-making concerning the project:

"Yes, I believe that it is very possible that it will be completed, I think that there will not be anything that could prevent it because there is an international pressure that is increasing. But where we have the possibility to influence is the way in which it is done and where it is done, with which we need to be careful." (32SFST)

Everyone agreed that completing the Pan-American Highway would have a huge impact on the province, both good and bad, but that the more specific effects could not be predicted. Building the road would undeniably increase the region's economy and the amount of visits, but also augment for instance land conflicts and other social issues as well as cause further environmental problems. Also, the security aspect would need to be reconsidered, and more attention from the police would be required. This is a question that arises from time to time and is central from the geopolitical ecology of the whole region.

In addition to road infrastructure, many places lack of basic services such as safe drinking water, adequate sanitation and electricity, which affect the quality of life and hinders tourism. The absence of a phone signal was highlighted especially in several indigenous communities. Basically, it makes running a business and communicating

with tourists impossible. Communities located out of the reach of a phone signal rely on external intermediaries to maintain contacts and being in charge of promotion and organization. One indigenous man told that the first necessity in the community was to install an antenna to be able to communicate with tourists. From a security perspective it would be crucial to be able to call for help in the case of an emergency. In another indigenous village where I stayed for a couple of nights, people had to walk one hour up a near by hill to obtain phone signal. One community had a public phone booth in the middle, which was not very reliable as it also ate my coins when trying to make a phone call. Differences in communication put communities working with tourism in an unequal position. Also, for example more strict security measures in boats were considered important because much of the travel in Darién is fluvial. As stated by on interviewee, projects concerning water, sanitation and electricity are broader tasks beyond tourism, that require systematic planning and more attention from the government.

5.1.3 Education, skills and knowledge

The prevailing perception was that the level of education was low, and people's knowledge and skills were insufficient to be able to manage tourism and receive tourists. Many people had migrated to Panama City to study or in search for employment possibilities but for those who have stayed in Darién educational opportunities were scarce. A former tourism student of the University of Darién commented that barely anyone from the same class had completed the degree. Many had dropped out or changed the subject of study because of the weak prospects of employment in the tourism sector and reluctance to becoming an entrepreneur. A feasible reason behind the low level of formal education was simply the lack of economic resources and the need of having to rely on big loans. That is also why many interviewees expressed a strong will to have alternative courses and trainings, and stated the importance of popular education instead of obtaining a formal degree. It is not only about the lack of knowledge of locals, but a lack of trustworthy accurate information available on Darién in general for outsiders, as contemplated:

"If you look there is very little information about Darién. There is little research, and the research is not published, it is not very open to the public. The fact that there is no information available, I think, is one of the reasons that people are unaware of this area. I feel that we have to do more research, we have to do more studies here, in different specialties, the scientific part, the tourist part, the sociological part, everything, we have to do research here, we need to invest more in research, that is what we have to promote." (32SFST)

Making broader decisions considering Darién is difficult if there is no background information about the local context on which to base. Knowledge on Darién is largely based on popular information, instead of scientific study.

The basics of how to treat a tourist arised in many conversations. People were afraid to "make mistakes", thus calling for learning more on practical skills, such as cooking, cleaning and collecting waste, and about themes like traditional food, customs and medicinal plants. Despite the lack of education, people considered locals to be very hospitable and welcoming, and always willing to help, as explained:

"Nothing can happen to you here, nothing that is not pleasant. Because we do have the culture of being hospitable, you are like at home. You just tell me 'I would like to see this place', well let's take you there, support you, take good care of you. But that's all we can do because we don't have the tools for this to grow as a tourist area." (35MGG)

This was considered not being enough and education were regarded as a fundamental base for succeeding in tourism. Also, for example the need of educating the police on tourism related issues was viewed necessary. Often the longer-term benefits of being able to provide good service for tourists were forgotten in pursuing economic benefits, as explained by a hotel employee:

"I think it is more than anything about teaching people what does it mean to provide good service. Because many people only think of what generates income. But they do not realize that telling the visitors more about Darién is eventually what will generate income. Because that person can bring another person (...) 'They told about this, they offered that, they gave me this'. But sometimes we no longer comply with this, it's just about getting my money. For example, we do not have maps to give. Before we did but not anymore, now everything is neglected. I think that most of all it comes down to the people who are responsible for training. Before, there were meetings, talks, even for the cleaning staff. We had guidance on how to fold the sheets and put the bed. But if we, as an association or as a group, received money, I think that the first thing we should do is invest in training, both for the staff who work with one, and for the owners." (30SFGT)

Considered particularly necessary was the need for constant environmental education and increasing people's knowledge of environmental standards. This should already

begin in school as children were viewed to have a great capacity to reach their parents. Environmental education should be targeted especially to communities located in strategic places considering the protected areas. Emphasis should be on popular education with simple words and concrete means, such as taking advantage of the radio, by using videos and organizing different workshops. One interviewee explained about educational issues on a national level:

"There are not many specialists in tourism, I think that in the whole country, specialists like that. The educational centers, even the Ministry of Education itself is failing in this. If it [tourism] is one of Panama's potentials for development, supposedly promoting it should start in already in schools and we should find professionals to teach. That I know of, here in Darién there is no school that would promote a career or a subject that has to do with tourism, in an academic way. Here, we do it in an empirical way." (32SFST)

As mentioned, people learn in practice by engaging on touristic activities. A man from an indigenous community explained that in the beginning they barely knew anything about interacting with outsiders but little by little they had been learning simple things, such as how to engage in conversations and ask questions. Of specific concern was the lack of language skills and many people emphasized the importance of learning at least some English. Interviewees considered that because of the language barrier often even minor skills are wasted, because communicating with foreigners is challenging. In indigenous communities the significance of the language barrier was highlighted as there are many people who do not speak even Spanish. Poor writing skills were also considered a central problem in communicating with tour operators and in applying for funding for different projects, stating the need for external support.

There exists a lot of local knowledge, especially related to the natural environment. However, people themselves do not necessarily realize or appreciate their knowledge, and are unaware of how to take advantage of their proficiency for tourism purposes, like described by one interviewee:

"That man you see over there, lives from fishing, but he masters hunting perfectly. Those two over there, they master hunting in the mountains perfectly. They can be good tour guides, forest rangers and all that, because those men know the forest like the plant of their hand, better than I do or the three of us here. But if those men are never told that this is a reality, that we need to participate in a great ecotourism project, they are going to stay away, stay at

home, they are not motivated, there is nothing that will motivate them. And what happens here is that 90% of the people has not even finished primary school, we are talking about people who are almost illiterate. That is our reality, they do not know how to write. They know many things and are experts in many things, they have a lot of skills in the sea. That man you see over there is a diver, he dives under the sea and has killed huge fish. The other is a fisherman, they dominate their branch. It is not that they didn't want to educate themselves but it's because the opportunity did not exist." (24JQG)

As illustrated, hunting has brought about thorough expertise on how to manage in the forest, and fishing has taught how to cope with difficult sea conditions, both skills that could be of great use in tourism. It is not about people not wanting to study but about the absence of opportunities to develop their skills formally. The quote reflects well the dilemma of motivation and the need for external encouragement. The low level of education was blamed on the government's indifference approach to creating opportunities for the people in Darién. Migrants from Colombia were accused to be poorly educated, thus not bringing significant contribution from the intellectual perspective.

5.1.4 Lack of motivation and participation

The poor education was linked to people's low level of motivation. Discussions revealed that Darién is dotted of various failed tourism-related and other projects. These have mainly been financed by NGOs, the State, or other parties. For example, there used to be a tourism cooperative and a tourism office in La Palma but after a couple of years after beginning, the activity ended. Incentives of building cabins have failed, usually because of the lack of money. Shops, hotels and restaurants have closed because of the lack of business. Events that before used to be popular and draw people from elsewhere have lost importance. Projects dealing with manufacturing specific products for tourists as well as for locals have failed because of the lack of market. In the majority of the cases there appeared not to be a clear reason behind the failure of projects, as expressed by a government official:

"There are many projects that have been established on processes that are unsuccessful that we do not know of. And they always say that so much money has been invested in Darién without seeing any changes, that 100 million, 200 million have been invested, I don't know how much, they say has been buried." (28MEG)

A significant amount of international development and conservation funding has been directed to the region. In the absence of concrete changes, people have been left wondering where all the money invested has eventually been used.

Internal conflicts, lack of interest of young people, lack of unity and participation, absence of proper follow-up, and distrust towards the leaders were listed among possible reasons behind unsuccessful initiatives. A common interpretation was that in the beginning people are excited but participation ends short. The lack of motivation has contributed to the failure of projects, but also the deficiency of changes and concrete results has further reduced people's motivation to participate. The lack of motivation was perceived as a cultural problem. The need for a change of culture, *cambio de cultura* was an expression often repeated by interviewees referring to the need of a broader change in the way of thinking. Altering people's mentality has resulted difficult, as described by a resident of La Palma: "The problem is the mentality of the people, when you have spent 500 years thinking in one way it is almost impossible to change that way of thinking" (34LPS). The same view was affirmed by a tourist guide:

"This is what I'm telling you. There is no inspiration, no motivation to do things, because people here, everyone is living as they have always lived. You know how is life in these towns. Someone arrives and tries to make changes but people do not care. We have all the resources, nature, the resources for tourism, but here we do not live of tourism, nor do we think how valuable tourism is, it is not promoted at all." (35MGG)

It is difficult to observe things from a different perspective when people have lived the same way for such a long time. Because the majority of people do not live of tourism they do not put effort in it either, or see the potential. Changing the way of thinking was associated with not valuing and maintaining the cultural heritage. How could cultural heritage be promoted for tourism if people themselves felt indifferent about it? The quote illustrates a central dilemma: at the same time external help is demanded, however people are not easily receptive for changes, especially for those coming from outside.

A tour guide explained that getting to the indigenous communities as an outsider and convincing them to get involved in tourism has been challenging and required organizational skills. Eventually they had been able to establish some tours and circuits working together with the communities. Past experiences of tourism not resulting in a steady activity have reduced motivation for those working with tourism. An indigenous man told that at the time when tourism was growing, people quickly became accustomed to the benefits it brought. Life was easy when tourists visited the community regularly. The rapid decline in tourism caused disappointment and reduced people's inspiration, which has remained up to date cutting down the interest and optimism in further tourism development.

Another issue brought up affecting motivation was the lack of a unified identity of Darién. Merging interests is difficult because of the heterogeneity of the population. Eventually everyone has the goal of improving the life of their own family, which has not promoted a consolidated sense of community and *identidad darienita*. The weak motivation has manifested in not assisting meetings, not taking responsibility or fulfilling promises. It has turned out difficult to find elements that would draw the attention of masses and make people committed. The problem of unemployment and lack of opportunities and future prospects was believed to have rendered people lazy.

In order to make projects and initiatives succeed, getting more organized, *necesidad de organizarse* was considered essential. Filtering driven people eager to share their knowledge, assembling groups of people interested in similar subjects and encouraging young people to take part were amongst the most mentioned. Education, voluntariness, interest and locality were repeated in many conversations:

"Education, like organizing committees in each place where there are tourists, forming committees of citizens who want to participate, not that they are forced to take part or that they participate because of novelty. People who are convinced that they are interested in tourism and then prepare them in the tourist aspect. And after that, prepare tourist guides who are people from the same community, well-trained, well-educated, well-oriented people, as well as prepare the community in general, and hotels. In some countries of South America there is a type of tourism, how is it called, like staying in a family accommodation, that families have like one or two well-suited rooms to receive tourists, family tourism or whatever they call it. They train volunteer families who want to do family tourism." (29 MES)

Examples from other countries could be followed in broadening the tourism offer in Darién. Neighborhood or community committees responsible for different themes would be a good way of making activities more organized. It is not only about creating new groups and organizations, but about strengthening and raising the profile of already existing local and community boards. Any community project could act as a rallying point in bringing people together and improving communication in general. Attention should be put on the way people are encouraged and invent incentives that would give public recognition. As proposed by an interviewee, these could include for instance awarding the best idea by for example donating a computer, or reward the cleanest neighborhood. It could also be reversed, and name the dirtiest community, which could then encourage people to change that reputation. These suggestions were aimed to tackle the growing problem of waste management, which was considered a concern regarding tourism. Although environmental problems were widely acknowledged, they were only recently being recognized as potential obstacles to tourism.

5.2 Between biodiversity paradise and ecological devastation

Reflecting upon the main tourism limiting factors identified by locals, this section turns focus to the environment and examines how local actors perceive the role of tourism in addressing environmental issues. First of all, discussions revealed that Darién faces a number of environmental problems ranging from local to global. Deforestation-, water- and waste-related issues are handled in more detail because they were the most highlighted. These problems were viewed in part, as a broader consequence of the world's environmentally destructive development trends, but also as an outcome of the State's weak environmental policies, stating the essence of geopolitical ecology. Then, the role of tourism as an environmental actor in increasing environmental awareness is reviewed through concrete experiences from the local level. The relation between conservation and control is further discussed within the context of Darién. Although environmental change was considered a threat, the understanding about broader cause-and-effect implications resulted surprisingly weak.

5.2.1 Environmental problems in Darién

Darién faces a variety of environmental challenges, which have increasingly altered the nature of the province, influencing people's well-being, and affecting the future prospects of tourism. Previous studies have addressed the overexploitation of resources and uncontrolled development already a long time ago. Deforestation caused by extensive cattle raising, selective logging, and extracting wood for sale has been evident especially in the western part of the province. The expansion of the agricultural frontier and deterioration of the water quality around urban areas that lack sewage treatment facilities and organized trash collection have been most visible in the interior part of the province. The coastal areas have been faced with problems such as the overexploitation of marine resources, competition over the shrimp resource between artisanal and industrial fishery. Slash and burn agriculture, illegal hunting, extraction of specific species of flora, and the effects of forest fires have reached critical levels throughout the province. (CBD, 2014, pp. 30-31; Suman, 2007b; Velásquez Runk, 2015).

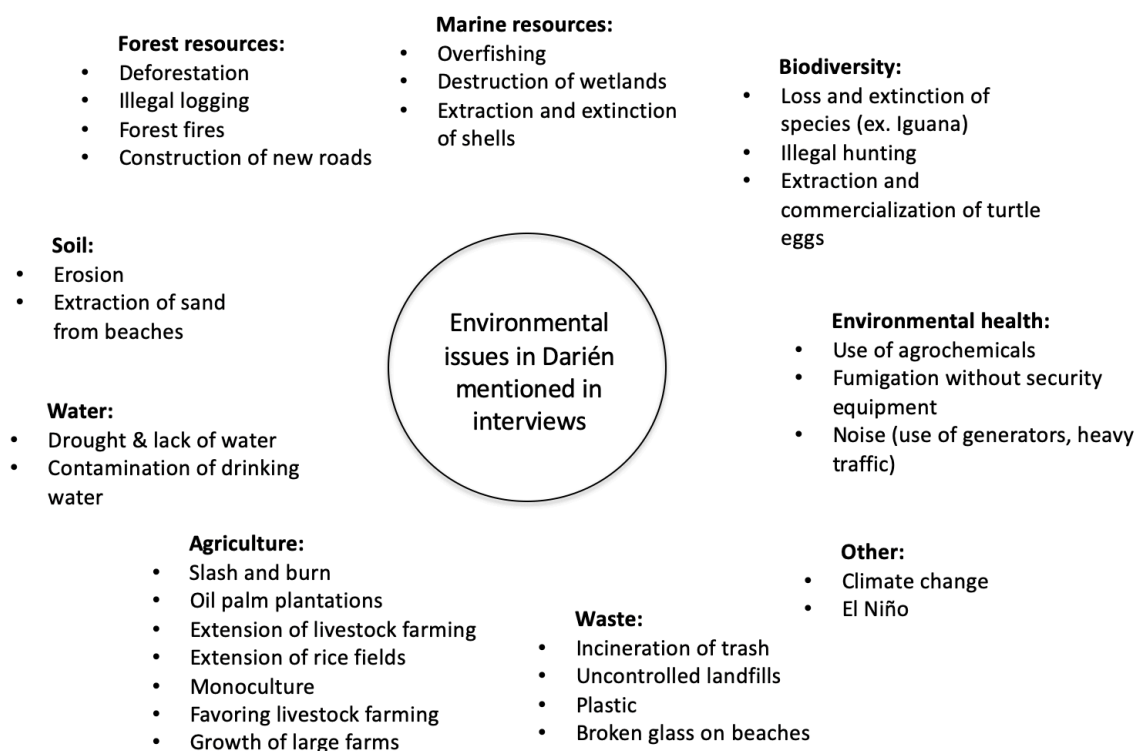


Figure7: Environmental problems in Darién mentioned in interviews.

All of the problems mentioned in previous studies were brought up in interviews and conversations, as illustrated in the figure above. The range of environmental concerns was broad ranging from local to global, many of them being interconnected and occurring as a consequence from each other. As rephrased by an interviewee, "to accept a problem you need to face it". Human-environment relations in Darién are shaped according to the role environment plays in the source of subsistence. For those engaged in tourism, the environment has adopted different meanings than for those who depend on exploiting the resources in earning their living. According to Blaikie and Brookfield (1987), environmental conflicts in the Third World context tend to be predominantly based on livelihoods, and "resources become resources when people define them as such" (Bryant & Bailey, 1997, p. 8). Concern for the environment and conservation efforts have conflicted with the interest to exploit natural resources in Darién (Velásquez Runk et al., 2007). Because tourism is vulnerable to environmental change and environmental disasters, some of the central problems will be addressed from a tourism perspective.

Deforestation

Deforestation is one of the major environmental problems in Darién and has been documented already for long. As argued by Suman (2007b), a clear turning point was the opening of the Pan-American Highway all the way to Yaviza in the late 1970s. Satellite images showed that deforestation was visible in the more accessible western part of the province while the eastern half and many coastal areas had remained rather intact. Still, forests have constantly kept turned into grasslands for livestock, the agricultural frontier reaching all the time further from the Pan-American Highway to other parts of the province. (ibid.). This study affirms that the same trend has continued up to date.

Deforestation was primarily blamed on migrants from the interior provinces of Panama, who have resettled in Darién and established large farms, thus leading small-scale farmers to distress. The government was accused for disregard of letting it happen. One interviewee explained, that it is common to leave a strip of forest next to the road, or a curtain as the person called it, so that the deforested area is not

immediately visible. By avoiding being noticed, it was easier to continue deforesting especially in the case that it was carried out illegally.

A common juxtaposition occurred between people with conflicting views on the use of resources. Especially farmers and those in favor of conservation debated on the destructive nature of agricultural practices. In Darién, the grand majority of people rely on agriculture and it has been the only way of making money, for a long time as contemplated by a farmer:

"97% of the producers of this town depend on agricultural activities. And to plant it is necessary to burn. And working the land is how we have always earned our living, planting rice, bananas and so on, and partially on cattle raising. And all of these activities lead to deforestation through burning. It is necessary because we lack mechanized agriculture, it is more expensive, machinery to work the land. So, they cannot tell us that we cannot continue agricultural activities that require burning. Plantain requires a burn, the banana, everything here requires a burn. Because if they say that we cannot do this they need to offer us options." (24JQG)

Slash and burn agriculture has been the traditional way of cultivating, and in more remote areas agriculture relies on traditional ways because of the lack of machinery. Farmers claimed that their traditional livelihood activity was being banned without giving any alternatives to sustain their families. Too often small farmers with only small plots of land were made scapegoats and targeted for their actions instead of tackling the more problematic cases of extensive farming. Slash and burn agriculture was considered a main cause of forest fires besides drought. During fieldwork, several serious forest fires were reported in the province, also destroying parts of protected areas. Farmers were criticized for focusing only on meeting current needs instead of acknowledging their actions in the long run. At the same, they were understood in the sense that they might lack the adequate knowledge and support in seeking for other, possibly more sustainable options, as explained by a guide:

"Many see that tourism is good, although perhaps it does not bring so much money. But there are many who are not interested, they are only interested in exploiting what they can at the moment. There is the sector that is the traditional one, which causes damage to the environment. But it is because they do not know or feel that they get support, or that they are far from developing activities that are more environmentally friendly, and closer to tourism, they do not have the information. It is like a paradigm that is difficult to break because they only know the activities that they pursue and they do not really know what tourism is about, although they have heard about it. They do not know how to develop something that could

benefit them, although they have the potential. Sometimes they destroy the potential they have for pursuing the traditional." (32SFST)

Becoming interested in tourism was seen unlikely because of the insufficient information about it. Ironically, a farmer who had a vision of putting up his own tourism enterprise stated in a conversation, that by deforesting he had got to know a lot of very beautiful places along the shore and deeper in the jungle, that he would otherwise never have got to know.

Deforestation and other problems derived from it pose a global problem. Usually the economic benefits associated flow elsewhere, which tends to be the case also in Darién.

"In Darién it has always been about cutting down the trees, it has always been the big problem. People come and become billionaires here by exporting wood. It is not a problem only at the level of Darién but at the global level because the trees are becoming extinct, along with extinguishing flora and fauna, it devastates everything." (34LPS)

"Around year 2003, the trunks that we saw passing at that time were large. But lately I have seen trunks that seem like primary trees. Now imagine, a tourist who comes here for pleasure and sees that. That is why I'm telling you that in order to boost tourism in Darién, the scheme for using the forests needs to be changed. That show cannot go on, because even us Panamanians when we see those loads of trees pass by on the road, people say ' what is happening, who authorized this ', some people say out loud 'who is giving the permission, they are taking the forests of Darién, the water ', there are people who actually say out loud. I think that the greatest potential that Darién has is tourism. But when you see gigantic loads of trunks about 2 meters wide, and the tourists, when they see that, of course they are touched." (29MEST)

As described, the feeling of continuously seeing loads of wood transported from Darién is alarming, not only from a tourism perspective but also from the perspective of locals. Establishing a new and a more selective type of approach by taking advantage of old trees, and processing wood into different items within the province could be one step in changing the style of logging. One interviewee contemplated that for many locals the forest has transformed into a commodity instead of being visible and touchable. For example, establishing communal forests where people could get acquainted with nature and providing information on different species was suggested, which could also be of interest for tourists. Extensive reforestation and establishing new protected areas were considered necessary.



*Figure 8: Deforestation in Darién.
Photo by Maija Meri*



*Figure 9: Transporting trunks from Darién.
Photo by Maija Meri*

Water

Deforestation is connected to a wide range of other problems, one of which is drought. At the time of visiting Darién between December and March, there was a severe lack of water in several places. For many, this was an alarming sign also on the concrete effects of climate change and how it could actually have a huge impact on everyday life. In La Palma I witnessed people from several communities coming from the other side of the bay by dugout canoes to get water with big tanks from the local well "pozo". In many communities, wells had dried up and water had to be fetched elsewhere. A 61-year-old man in La Palma commented that never during his life had the well dried, although it was built around 80 years ago. However, now the situation was critical.

Drought and lack of water were reported to recur every dry season. An interviewee told that the rivers dry up; sometimes for two days, sometimes for a month. Now, water was being distributed in big tanks by the fire department and with the help of SENAFRONT. Some places had been without water already for several days and people called for regulating water during the dry season to make water more evenly available for everyone. Like one interviewee summed up, it is possible to live without electricity but impossible to live without water.

Water is not only necessary to sustain life and livelihoods, but also central for the health and happiness of tourists, attraction and a vehicle for many tourist activities such as swimming, diving, snorkeling and fishing (Stonich, 1998, p. 27). Several studies have demonstrated the unsustainable use and poor management of water resources in tourism (Stonich, 1998; Cole, 2012). The scarcity of water was not brought up directly influencing tourism in any of the conversations. In Darién, tourism occupies only a slight share of water, although lodgings use a relatively bigger share of water. If tourism was to grow, the availability of water would surely become a subject of concern.

Waste

In addition to the availability of water, also the quality of water was an issue. As observed by Suman (2007b), residents especially in coastal communities surrounding the Gulf of San Miguel have been worried about access to safe drinking water; however, they tend not to see the link between their poor waste disposal practices and the need for clean drinking water. This study supports the argument. Besides deforestation, the grand majority of interviewees considered garbage as the central environmental problem. Plastic bottles and cans were described to “invade” the towns. In Darién, waste is mainly burnt because of the lack of options. Uncontrolled landfills pose health risks and cause concern regarding the spread of fire. Various interviewees mentioned that they had no other choice than to burn the waste against their will. Much of the recyclable material ends up burnt because recycling is scarce, especially in the areas that are not accessible by vehicle. Merchants were blamed in part for generating waste because they were the ones importing goods. The waste issue was chiefly considered a cultural problem, as described by various interviewees:

"The Panamanian is very filthy, I am Panamanian but the Panamanian is very filthy, we have no culture, from that point of view we have no culture. As I am eating [pretends to throw the garbage on the ground] 'No, don't do that, pick it up, put it somewhere, find a bin, or burn it, or recycle it.' (33LPS)

Interest towards finding solutions to the garbage problem divided people. The impact of garbage on tourism was evident. The country's updated Sustainable Tourism Development Master Plan for 2020-2025 (ATP, 2020) also highlights the non-existent

and poor management of solid waste in Darién as precarious, thus having a direct and immediate impact on tourist activity as visitors perceive and negatively value the unhealthy environment. From a tourism viewpoint, waste tended to focus on aesthetic values and people were concerned about how places visually appeared for tourists. Solving the problem of rubbish was seen as a condition for tourism. "If we want tourism we have to start by sorting out everything that is waste and garbage so that we have an orderly and clean community, putting a recycling point." (15JQG). The possibility of recycling and making it visible was also seen as a positive factor in promoting tourism. Cleaning activities had been organized in communities for example by schools, community organizations and SENAFRONT, although it was claimed that SENAFRONT just tries to win people to their side by participating in such activities.

In an indigenous community irregularly visited by tourist groups, it was a habit to organize a joint cleaning before the arrival of the tourists. Part of the money that the tourism organization obtained from the tourists as an entrance fee to the community was actually used to pay for the residents themselves for cleaning their own community. Once, a group of tourists had arrived before prior notice. The people were not prepared and had not cleaned the community, thus receiving irritated feedback about the dirtiness. In another indigenous community, I came across with a middle-aged American woman after her bird-watching tour. She commented that she was extremely disappointed to see garbage all along the forest path. She told that she would not recommend Darién for anyone despite its good reputation in spotting rare bird species. Because she was so upset, she did not want to buy handicrafts either. Meanwhile the indigenous women were gutted for not being able to sell anything to her. These episodes demonstrate that people tend not to be motivated to clean for their own sake and well-being, but only when it involves a benefit, in this case the economic benefit brought by tourists. It also supports the argument of people not fully understanding the connection between waste management practices and clean water. In addition, the incidents show that dissatisfied tourists are in a powerful place in creating and spreading the reputation of a specific place within the tourism context.

Poor waste management is a serious issue in Darién, although tourism has proven to play part in positively awakening people to the issue. Still, much needs to be done before the effects of inadequate waste handling are perceived beyond the aesthetics and that the causal link between the wider environment is understood.



*Figure 10. Garbage burning in an illegal landfill.
Photo by Maija Meri*



*Figure 11: Street art in La Palma reflecting the waste problem in Darién.
Photo by Maija Meri*



*Figure 12: Street art in La Palma reflecting the problem of deforestation.
Photo by Maija Meri*

5.2.2 Tourism and environmental awareness

Tourism can both contribute to environmental conservation and be the cause of environmental deterioration. The pace and intensity of tourism development corresponds to increased environmental degradation. Environmental problems remain slight if tourism development happens slowly (Nepal, 2003). In Darién, tourism has so far caused little environmental harm because it is of small scale and a minor activity. Locals mostly referred to tourism in Darién as ecotourism and were in favor of controlling the pace of developing tourism:

"Tourism has to be well managed in the sense of, tourism cannot be massive, especially in Darién, practice a very controlled tourism, a tourism that is sustainable but in the strict concept of the word, a well-managed tourism". (29MEST).

Experiences from Darién show that tourism has in many ways contributed to environmental awareness and knowledge through learning to look at the environment from another perspective. This was the case in one indigenous community that had recently initiated with a community-based tourism project financed by an international NGO. As part of the initiative, they had installed trail cameras in the forest to be able to observe the animals. The community members told that they were surprised how much wildlife they were actually able to see and felt excited every time they gathered to watch the recordings. Seeing the animals in action had enhanced their interest towards protecting their natural habitat. Illegal hunting had decreased, although disagreements had arisen within the community with those who continued hunting. In addition, the people had learnt new skills, such as use of the GPS. Tourism was viewed as a motivation for conserving different animals. The amount of several species, such as iguanas was mentioned to have decreased because people hunt them for food. Projects targeting the revitalization of specific species could be organized via tourism, following for instance the example of volunteering with turtles.

Personal and concrete experiences were important in observing the environment and increasing environmental consciousness, as illustrated by an interviewee:

"Once, I went on a tour here to the lagoon, we took like, we were not even 15, like 12 people. And I'm telling you that those little herons were scared and they all left their nests and went

far away, they went back to the trees over there and they left all their nests unprotected, and some newborn chicks and everything. No, it was a very big mistake that we made. But again, you learn, you learn sometimes with mistakes, with mistakes. That is why it is right that to go bird watching one cannot take 10 people, neither 20 nor 50". (29MEST)

Prior to this event, the interviewee had had a discussion with a guide about the suitable amount of people to bring on a birdwatching trip. However, it was not until this particular experience that it became clear why the group of people to bring to such activity should be minimal. In another case, a person working regularly with tourists had taken a big group of students to visit a protected. He had not considered the side effects brought by the visit such as sanitation and waste disposal, and the carrying capacity of nature was exceeded. These examples affirm, that even those who should namely be well aware of environmental issues may not necessarily act according to their values or think it to the end. Promoting tourism in general was believed to put more pressure on people to take care of their environment.

Typical for tourism development has been to underestimate its negative environmental impacts and to consider tourism less destructive than other forms of resource extraction arguing that its benefits outweigh its costs (Nepal et al., 2016, p. 10). For example, garbage generated by tourism in remote areas has become visible in the case of the Everest region in the Himalayas, where the amount of waste has led to serious problems (Nepal, 2003). In the case of Darién, waste generated by tourism is not a priority problem, but observations support the fact that when striving for future tourism development, its potential negative environmental impacts tend to be ignored.

In Darién, some coastal areas are renowned for the exceptional fishing opportunities. A specific environmental concern was related to fishing. I was told about tourists who come to fish, and end up killing vast amount of the catch that they are not able to make use of. Tourists have tried to pay the guides with their catch instead of paying with money, which was considered disrespectful towards locals. Overfishing and the potential loss of species of fish was highlighted as fishing has gained popularity in the

area. Establishing a conservation plan for the maritime area and creating clear rules on fishing practices for tourists were proposed.

The interviews revealed that in many occasions the hope for increasing numbers of tourists was prioritized at the expense of the environment. The economic benefits brought by tourism were a central motivation for people to take better care about their environment. New forms of tourism besides the traditional ecotourism scheme were brought up, such as developing health tourism based on traditional natural medicine, and expanding the range of tourist activities. For example, focusing on adventure travel attracting passionate, high-paying tourists gives communities the potential to create tourism products that suit the socio-ecological system and produce relevant conservation and sustainable development outcomes (Knowles, 2019).

In general, tourism was perceived having huge potential in conservation efforts in Darién:

"It has potential, and a lot because it is a unique place in Panama, there is no other place like Darién in Panama, it has a unique potential but it is not being exploited. And that is both good and bad, because in a certain way, if tourism is not promoted, there will be no awareness of the nature that we have here and if there is no awareness, the deforestation that is already taking its course will continue. And the positive side would be that if tourism is promoted, people become aware of conservation and invest in creating parks, reserves, and that the government protects more forests and stuff. But if there is no investment in that aspect, it will not change. In other words, it is different when I was a child, there were more rivers, there were more animals, there were things that you cannot see anymore. And it has been, what, 10 years, and from now to another 10, 20 years, the development is going to be much more impressive." (27MEST)

Government interest and support was requested in creating new parks and protected areas to be able to legally delimit more areas for conservation purposes. In Panama, the National System for protected areas (Sistema Nacional de Áreas Protegidas [SINAP]) was established in 1998 with the principal aim of preserving the diverse terrestrial and marine ecosystems, natural landscapes and essential geological formations, and to maintain natural biological diversity and avoid the extinction of species of wild plants and animals for the benefit of present and future generations.

5.2.3 Conservation and control

Biodiversity conservation has become increasingly geopolitical in its nature, and powerful geopolitical actors work through conservation in an effort to control, constrain and produce global siconatures in advantageous geopolitical configurations (Massé & Margulies, 2020, p. 13). At the moment, the Darién National Park and the protected areas are not particularly in the center of tourism activity. Potentializing these areas adequately for tourism could serve to maintain them and to increase conservation. If the areas would gain more publicity and interest it could potentially prevent deforestation and help to control illegal activities, as reflected by one interviewee who had just found out that a man had cut down around 30 hectares of forest in one reserve. On the other hand, controlling tourism for example within the Darién National Park was considered legitimate. Directing only parts of the park for tourism purposes, and establishing clear regulations concerning the use of the park would be well-grounded. It could help promoting environmental conservation and be vital from the perspective of biodiversity conservation, as explained by an interviewee:

"The Darién National Park is like a place that not just anyone can go and start trampling and carrying seeds on the soles of their shoes, which could cause harm to other species (...) Because I think that what can be done in the National Park is to define like a buffer zone, and say, up to here you can do nature tourism, up to here you can do bird watching, up to here you can do organic farming, but from here to here no, that is my opinion." (29 MES)

The big question concerning the National Park was the possibility of completing the Pan-American Highway some day. Despite the economic interests in increasing trade between Central and South America, there have been concerns of losing one of the vastest and bio diverse forest areas (Miller, 2014). As already occurred in Darién, better accessibility has caused more environmental problems. If the Pan-American Highway was to be completed, it is evident that the rainforest of Darién would rapidly be cleared for agricultural practices (Suman, 2007a).

Suggestions on conservation for profit were also touched on in interviews. A farmer proposed that the State should title the properties and pay a minimum of 50 USD per hectare for small ranchers and farmers in order to take care of the forest instead of

deforesting. One non-indigenous interviewee suggested that indigenous communities could be paid to protect their culture and environment. The preservation of indigenous cultures would also bring benefits for others because it is of interest to tourists. With reference to this, members of an indigenous community told that the government had built new houses with tin roofs instead of traditional ones, which was believed to have affected negatively in the interest of tourists. I had made similar observations already earlier while working on a project in the neighboring country Costa Rica. This indicates the existing complexities involved with questions of cultural conservation. Previous studies show that conservation for a monetary incentive in general does not provide a sustainable basis in the long run.

According to a political ecology thinking, it is only through political means that a solution to environmental problems will be devised. The need for political analysis is paramount in the measure that the environment is politicized, although the relationship between politics and ecology is not an equal one" (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). The Ministry of Environment (Ministerio de Ambiente de Panamá [MIAMBIENTE]) is the State institution in charge of protecting, caring for and ensuring the preservation of natural resources and the environment. In Darién, the environmental authority has played little role in controlling environmental affairs locally because of the long history of disinterest, as described by one of the interviewees:

"Here, the environmental authority has lost absolutely all respect during these last 10 years, it has lost respect. Now there is a director who is eager to work but everyone disrespects him and disrespects the laws. And also, the director can do only to a certain extent because it is not that he can put someone in prison or anything. He also has to have support from SENAFRONT and SENAN because those people [people who break the law for example by deforesting illegally] are so disrespectful." (29 MES)

For one individual it is difficult to gain back respect and authority after many years of negligence and begin changing long standing practices of not respecting the law in the region. Reflecting upon the subject of environmental knowledge, even a government employee seriously questioned their own expertise:

"That is the important part, if they [tourists] are asking, we as technicians have to be prepared. And sometimes, when the tourist goes somewhere they know more than we do. We need more

training and adequate tools. When they ask us for help, in the end we know what we need to do." (43MEGT)

This reinforces the accusations of locals about the poor competence of government officials, and states the importance of education and integrated State policies. Environmental impacts can be controlled and minimized if appropriate policies and actions exist, and if they are implemented by locally based actors (Nepal, 2003). Government institutions were repeatedly blamed for the lack of interest in taking a stand on finding solutions for environmental problems. However, this is not surprising as long as officials lack the adequate skills and knowledge. Top-down decision-making does not tend to recognize the needs and aspirations of local people, thus creating negligence among locals and emphasizing their role as passive bystanders. This has largely been the case with tourism in Darién, as locals have not been sufficiently heard and involved in planning tourism, which has enhanced the potential for disagreements between different parties.

5.3 Stakeholder power relations

Bringing together the previous sections, this part reviews how power relations between different stakeholders appear in the tourism-environment nexus. First, different interests that have arisen locally regarding the use of resources are discussed. Then, the role of indigenous people, SENAFRONT, and the government are weighed in more detail. Finally, territorial conflicts are examined. The interviews and past experiences demonstrated that many tensions exist related to who has the possibility to engage with tourism and how. Opportunities tend to be unequal for example for locals and foreigners. Further geopolitical interests were claimed to appear through territorial issues and questions concerning land ownership. Because nature plays a central part in making Darién attractive as a tourist destination, the limited resources are subject to competing interests, both among different tourism players, and between different sectors. This was manifested through local level conflicts as pressure is increasingly put on limiting traditional livelihood activities.

5.3.1 Local level competing interests

A number of different parties are involved in the overall tourism industry with competing interests about the use and allocation of resources. Various studies have demonstrated that the planning and implementation of various forms of tourism initiatives has produced environmental conflicts (Douglas, 2014). In this study conflicting interests were observed among and between tourism operators, between tourism actors and people pursuing other livelihood activities, between different ethnic groups (mainly indigenous people versus others), between locals and migrants from other parts of the country, between nationals and foreigners, between locals and state actors such as the border police and employees of different ministries; and between locals and other institutional actors. "Descriptions of ecologically 'predatory' states and transnational corporations, 'eco-friendly' non-governmental organizations or grassroots actors (e.g. poor farmers or shifting cultivators) are common in the literature, but tend to obscure the complexities and contradictions associated with the actions of all actors" (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). Thus, each stakeholder group is not monolithic and the interests within each group can vary.

At the local level, tourism-related competing interests were present in specific locations with touristic activities arising from the common interest of exploiting the same resources. For instance, in the community of Puerto Piñas (Piñas Bay) tensions related to tourism have a long history. The community provides an example how conflicting interests related to land rights; environmental practices and income opportunities come together in tourism. In Puerto Piñas, like in whole Darién, tourism is primarily based on the natural environment. The central tourism player in the area is Tropic Star Lodge, which is a foreign owned upmarket resort specialized in sport fishing. It was founded already in the 1960s and it is located at a small distance from the community. The resort provides employment for the majority of the locals as well as for a few people from neighboring communities. Over time, the resort has consolidated its position but also received a lot of criticism. In interviews, critique was related to the resort's monopoly as the only tourism player, poor wages and working

conditions, limiting traditional livelihood activities of the locals, and the low level of cooperation with the local people.

The monopoly of the resort was perceived negatively, and many people complained about the lack of competition in the tourism sector. Several interviewees hoped for alternative accommodation and tourism options, and told that people interested in developing new tourism initiatives in the area had repeatedly been turned down for certain reasons. In the absence of competition for labor force, the resort could set salaries, and terms and conditions of employment according to their own standards. The resort was also accused of using its dominant position in decision-making and negotiating over the locals. One interviewee summarized his frustration on the unequal power relations:

"Because this town existed before Tropic, so this town cannot be commanded by them, and now I feel that it is commanded by them. The town has to accept what they say, although they arrived last. Because they are foreigners and they were the last ones to come. It changes the image of foreigners." (20PPST)

The quote indicates the lack of local people's possibilities to influence and that attitudes towards foreigners in general can be negatively shaped through individual experiences. One interviewee felt that for many years, tourism had in a way been held as a secret by a few tourism actors, who had visions for Darién and the possibility to pursue their ideas. The tourism field had been kept "closed", and opportunities for new players to engage in the activity had been even intentionally limited, indicating the fear of possible competition and worry of changing the nature of tourism. On the micro level, communication between different tourism actors was perceived good. Correspondingly, on the more macro level no official dialogue existed between tourism actors within the country.

Making traditional livelihood activities more complicated was related to the contest over land and natural resources. According to earlier observations, tensions caused by organized sport fishing activities had been documented already before (Suman, 2007b). During the years, the resort had succeeded in gaining an area of the sea more than 30 km in radius from Puerto Piña, in which industrial fisheries are prohibited.

Small-scale fishing practiced by the locals had been complicated by banning technologies, such as gill nets and long lines, evidently causing conflicts with local communities opposing to restrictions of their traditional activities. (ibid). The interviews confirmed that these issues continued existing. A fisherman, former employee of the resort, described the situation as follows:

"I no longer have to do with them, but I get annoyed when they bother me, because they don't let me work like I want to work. When I'm fishing they try to forbid me, that's why I got my fishing permit and all that. They forbid me to fish because supposedly the water is theirs. They complicate it and say that from there all the way to the hill over there is theirs, they won't let us work there, they have even put a ranger." (20PPST)

Delimiting the sea area was a subject of long-lasting rift reflecting the concrete outcomes of power relations between different actors. For locals, fishing had become more time- and money consuming because they needed to go further to fish, thus meaning more expenses in gasoline. On the other hand, restrictions and control of the sea area could function to prevent overfishing in the area by commercial vessels coming from elsewhere. This again could act as an advantage for local small-scale fishers.

In the case of Puerto Piña, the interaction between locals and tourists has remained superficial because such specialized tourism leaves little room for additional activities and cultural exchange outside the resort premises. This provoked a sense of inferiority among locals, because tourists were not considered being interested of their traditional culture and lifestyle. Despite the strong claims about the resort's course of action, at the same time many were grateful about the employment opportunities and wealth that it had provided to the community. Puerto Piña is a remote area where income opportunities are scarce, thus the resort was described to have given life to the community. Although a few former employees of the resort interviewed adopted negative attitudes towards their former employer, they felt very fortunate that the work had enabled providing good education for their children as well as a decent pension. The relationship of interdependence between foreign tourism actors and locals was described by an interviewee:

"The main income here is through the company and through tourism. The company gives life to the community as well as the community to the company, because the employees depend on the company and the company also depends on its employees (...) If there was no resort or tourism here, there would be no source of income in our community (...) Because it is thanks to tourism that those who work there can buy from those who are farmers, who sell bananas, corn, fish. So, if there was no resort, there would not be income in our community (...) From my point of view, tourism gives life to my community." (21PPS)

Tourism provides many indirect benefits for the small-scale farmers of the area because the resort as well as the local people purchases their products. If land were taken from the small-scale farmers, it would weaken the local employment opportunities and farmers would not be able to supply products for tourism purposes anymore. Particularly much discord was observed between tourism actors and farmers in general. Eventually, also the government benefits from employment opportunities provided by tourism in remote areas, as there is less need for economic subsidies. The same occurs in the case of indigenous tourism initiatives.

5.3.2 Position of the indigenous people

Indigenous tourism is a specific sub-state situation and examples from indigenous communities in different parts of the world show that tourism has been often used as a means to further their own geopolitical aspirations within the context of territorial issues (Weaver, 2010). Previous studies from Panama show that there are remarkable differences how different indigenous people have organized tourism and the ownership of touristic activities (Velásquez Runk, 2012; Snow, 2000). The indigenous Emberá-Wounaan have traditionally been at a considerable disadvantage when working with tour companies compared for example with the indigenous Guna, who have been able to keep control over the tourist activities in the area of Guna Yala. The Emberá-Wounaan participating in tourism were portrayed as "simply the unorganized employees of businessmen in Panama City, and as such must try to strike the best individual deals they can. Yet they are often naive in the ways of the market and the fact of commerce, and are not difficult to exploit" (Snow, 2000). This study does not fully share this view, but results show that indigenous Emberá-Wounaan in Darién are very dependent on other actors in organizing tourism.

The indigenous culture plays a big part in making Darién attractive as a tourist destination. However, amongst all the actors involved, the indigenous people are usually in the most vulnerable position and potential subject for exploitation. Indigenous communities have primarily relied on other actors, such as individual persons or NGOs in developing and helping to finance their tourism activities. Support is needed for example with basic infrastructure, handling contacts and making agreements with agencies, with publicity, with the language barrier as knowledge of English is rare, and with transporting tourists. Communication in general is challenging because of the poor telecommunications network. Tourism has not provided a stable income source because its volume has varied. Indigenous communities are more vulnerable to changes of the overall tourism situation because they do not have such an established clientele as the upmarket lodges. One interviewee reflected upon the “good old days” when describing the changes in the tourism situation:

"We as Emberá here from this area of Darién, after all, for me those times were like an additional support, like development. An example: a cruise arrived with around 100 people and we dedicated ourselves to making handicrafts, such as *cocobolo*, and another kind of wood that we work on, and were able to sell them. Because of selling crafts, we could fill our instant needs. If before I was not able to buy for example a pound of sugar, with the additional income of the tourists I could provide for my family, my children. We dedicated ourselves to making crafts, and to selling them. We had put a lot of hope in tourism, we waited and when we saw a cruise coming, again we were happy. And we gave our everything because we wanted to offer them the best, because we knew that when they came here they bought handicrafts and our whole family was happy. But these days it is no longer the case." (39LCGT)

Some years ago, tourism was booming and cruises made regular visits in Darién. Tourism revenues helped with everyday expenses and people were looking forward to visitors with eager. Around the year 2000 more communities were engaging with tourism, also bringing about more competition. Soon the number of cruises dropped drastically. Familiarizing with the indigenous cultures had become possible also at Rio Chagres near Panama City, thus not requiring travel all the way to Darién. Because tourism had been introduced as a means of economic benefit at the expense of agricultural activities, income was diminished when tourist numbers declined.

For the indigenous people, territorial issues beyond tourism have been subject of political debate. Neoliberal governance in Panama has led to diminishing indigenous

rights to environments and land led to constant struggle over land rights (Velásquez Runk, 2012). In Darién, indigenous people reside in indigenous territories as well as on communal lands. The typical arrangement when visiting indigenous communities is that the tour operator or the visitor pays a negotiated fee for the village per visitor, which at the time of fieldwork ranged between 10 and 20 US dollars. Any additional activity such as dances or seeing the "shaman" had extra cost. Handicrafts were for sale but there was no guarantee of getting any sold for tourists, which put the craftspeople (usually women) in a more vulnerable and unstable position. During conversations many indigenous women commented that it had become clearly more difficult to sell handicrafts than it was before.

Competition occurred also within communities. When staying in one indigenous community I was caught in the middle of a slightly awkward situation, where members of two different community associations with their own lodging begun quarreling about who had the right to accommodate me, thus gaining profit from my stay. This put me in an uncomfortable position because I was not familiar of the internal power relations and obviously wanted to act in the most diplomatic way possible. The situation revealed underlying conflicts among the community members and indicated that competition from the few visitors could be fierce.

5.3.3 Role of the border police

The role of SENAFRONT is underlined because it is the main representative of the Panamanian state in Darién as well as in other more remote places of the country. Since its foundation in 2008, the main purpose has been to protect national borders against illegal drug trafficking and potential incursions from Colombian militarist groups. In the beginning, SENAFRONT quickly acquired more power and their image was for long military. Officers were considered intimidating as they were wearing masks and carrying heavy weapons, which have played part in reinforcing Darién's bad reputation. Only during recent years have they lowered their profile, loosened control a bit and become more approachable. In addition to providing security they have participated in contributing to health, transportation, education and other

community services. Projects such as dealing out food aid and toys for communities have in part helped in gaining more sympathy and winning over the population little by little. During my fieldwork period I observed that SENAFRONT had cleaned up the forts of La Palma and set up a huge poster of them. They had also helped in building a house for the retired in Jaqué, and were participating in distributing water.

The relation between locals and SENAFRONT remains complex. It was described bearable, although many locals still felt antipathy towards SENAFRONT. The police have been accused for misconduct with locals and negative attitudes towards SENAFRONT were expressed in terms of restricting people's freedom. In the past, the excessively tight control led for example to limiting the amount of food people were allowed to carry to remote communities, because it was said that people brought food to the guerillas. People still felt intimidated by SENAFRONT because they were forced to deal with them at least every time crossing the province border. The weight of suspecting people for illegalities was reflected in a conversation with one interviewee, when describing the mundane process of entering the province:

"Because the fact that everyone gets checked there, we citizens feel outraged, it outrages us because it takes away your freedom and gives you the message that you are suspicious, show me what you have, that's the message you get. Lately I don't carry a lot of luggage anymore, although I am used to travelling with a backpack and like three more packages. But every time I try to remind myself not to carry so much luggage because of the inspection. That is also something that bothers, not only the citizen but also the tourist." (29 MES)

As a consequence of making one feel suspicious by going through people's belongings the interviewee had tried to change her habits and manage with less luggage instead of traveling with more bags in order to avoid contact with the border police. Tourists might also feel disturbed of such behavior on behalf of the police. One interviewee presumed that incidents that have happened in other parts of the country, such as disappearance of two tourists in Chiriquí, have caused SENAFRONT being overall more precise with tourists. From an environmental perspective, the role of SENAFRONT resulted important as the key authority and present throughout the province. Because they had all the means to move around on terrain and on water, they were usually the first informed in the case of any incident, such as forest fires.

5.3.4 Government input

The government's weak presence and lack of interest in Darién has been displayed by earlier papers and was a subject of complaint in a number of interviews. The government authorities have left, in particular the coastal areas, its people and management of natural resources without attention (Suman, 2007b). Regardless of the presence of several institutional actors in the coastal areas, no collective coordination mechanism has existed at the national or regional level (ibid.). The government was perceived to have held Darién abandoned already for a long time and interviewees called for government support and determined government policies, also regarding tourism.

The State's principal tourist body is the Panama Tourism Authority, ATP. Darién has namely been included in the two latest Master Plans for Tourism (ATP, 2008, 2020), but no concrete action has been taken. Much responsibility on the areas nonexistent tourism development was put on the government, as expressed by one interviewee:

"I think that to a large extent it is also the responsibility of the government institutions (...) I think that the institutions that are responsible for promoting tourism and guiding the communities have not played their role, I think so, they have not played their role. And they believe that tourism is only Panama [Panama City] and the canal, also the Panama Canal. And they don't know that there are other things that are beautiful too. That they are worth promoting and that they would generate a lot of income for the communities." (29MES)

A hotel worker felt annoyed about the weakened presence of the ATP. Although hotels pay taxes for the government they did not feel to get anything back:

"The negative thing that I have seen is that sometimes the entities that correspond to providing support to one, are not doing their job. Because at least the Panamanian Institute of Tourism [IPAT, nowadays ATP] used to give us a lot of support. But now we are given very little. Before, we were told about networks and so on, this was like 4 or 5 years ago. Because as a hotel, 10% of the income of each room corresponds to them, to the Ministry of Tourism. It appears straight in the invoice and 10% goes directly to them. At least before you felt that you got something back, a benefit, but now nothing." (30SFGT)

At the time of fieldwork, there had recently been a responsible named by the ATP in Darién, but nobody seemed to know who that person was and how could that person be contacted. Nor was confidence in the expertise particularly high, as one of the interviewees working closely in tourism put it:

"I went to the ATP and they told me a couple of months ago, first they said that a person is yet to be named, and then I asked and they said yes someone had already been named, but I don't know who that person is. Supposedly, it should have been done a couple months ago. But anyway, we don't know the person, we don't know if he's named or not, or who he is. And if he's a local, then surely, he will know more about fishing than about tourism, an inexperienced person, but well, that's politics right." (32SFST)

Nor was the interviewee aware of any tourism plan the ATP might have. Despite its ambitions, the tourism plan had no significance in practice and the majority of people did not even know that such a plan existed. And those who had heard about the plan questioned the grounds of the territorial division of its three different tourism zones. As described, the link between government agencies and locals was weak, if absent, and even those working actively with tourism had no relation with government officials of the tourism sector. The level of expertise and true interest of government officials was continuously questioned. People felt that they could not rely on the State's actions in handling things fairly. For example, foreign tourism entrepreneurs were claimed to be able to make agreements directly with the government without acknowledging local opinions. "The state commonly tends to lend its power to dominant groups and classes, and thus may reinforce the tendency for accumulation by these dominant groups and marginalization of the losers, through such actions as taxation, food policy, land tenure policy and the allocation of resources" (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987).

Power relations were reflected in the fact that local knowledge and experience were not considered in local level decision-making. One interviewee commented on a tourist who had by coincidence visited the community. The person had noticed various needs in basic infrastructure and afterwards sent money for construction projects. Part of the money was used to build a public bathroom; which people were happy about. With the money left the community had planned to build an aqueduct. Eventually, a government representative had decided to build the new well on top of the hill against the suggestions of the locals. The water pipe ended up not working because during dry season there was not enough water. This was a huge waste of money and effort for the whole community, bringing about much frustration. The

poor planning and implementation of the project was blamed on the government and the indifference of government officials.

States may work as a facilitator for tourist development through loose environmental regulations and the lack of control, opportunities for land privatization, provision of infrastructure, allocation of soft credits, and tax benefits for large investments (Rainer, 2018). Projects are convinced for locals by potential employment opportunities but the negative effects such as increasing land and property values generating uneven development are neglected (Smith, 2008). The need to increase institutional governance in Darién has been claimed by several papers, but it requires qualified personnel, training and adequate infrastructure (Suman, 2007b). A tourist guide compared the situation in Panama with the neighboring country Costa Rica, where the state has been actively involved in supporting locals for example by providing English language instruction. In order for anything to change, the authorities need to listen to the people and listen to the suggestions for possible problems people might have. One interviewee believed that at the moment when the people and the government would realize the potential of Darién and begin to develop it consciously, it would eventually turn into a very touristy place.

The government appeared to the locals as a faceless authority mainly because of the lack of interest and communication. On the other hand, an NGO worker expressed that there is a tendency of people always blaming the government for whatever. Political decisions concerning land ownership were amongst the questions that caused the most annoyance.

5.3.5 Territorial conflicts

Disputes concerning the control over land and territory were repeatedly brought up in interviews as the issue causing continuous tension among different actors. From the environmental perspective, the representation of Darién as a dangerous and backward place has played a central part in justifying the interventions by outsiders, such as land grabbers (Velásquez Runk, 2015). Land was considered of great value but

owning land was only the privilege for the few and chosen. If simplified, land ownership signifies power and the more land you possess, the more power you have. Compared to other provinces, Darién has still much forest and untapped land left. Provinces in central Panama used to be covered with forest but nowadays, as one interviewee put it "There is no shade even for the cows. No one has put a stop to it, not the government, no one." (24JQG). In Darién, cattle raising and agriculture have been the main activities occupying land, especially in the interior and more accessible parts, where the growth of large farms has been rapid at the expense of small ones. In coastal areas, agriculture has remained mainly of small-scale relying on traditional methods.

With less land available in the country, the gaze has been turning to Darién. The province was perceived as a place with possibilities of making profit by exploiting its natural resources:

"As we still have had a lot of forest, Darién is seen as a province, like when those big hooded politicians come and say 'Darién is the granary of Panama and of America, it is the granary'. And when they say this I get scared inside because I believe this means that they come to devastate it, and bring cattle. But besides seeing Darién as a barn they see it, it is like the great corral of Panama, because what they think is to cut down the forest, put cows, that is the traditional (...) They see Darién as a province to extract wood and increase the agricultural and livestock frontier, nothing else." (29 MES)

Forest has constantly been cleared for agricultural purposes, however there is still much nature left in the province as described by one interviewee:

"Darién is developed, it has great ecotourism potential. Because even though in the surroundings of the highway much has been destroyed, the *interioranos* from Los Santos, Herrera and Veraguas have destroyed a lot of forest because of extensive cattle ranching. Here, you can still see a lot of nature. From the plane you can see the immensity of the immense forest. There are places here where man has not penetrated, conquered it. I have traveled the province by air all the way to San Blas, it is an endless forest man, endless." (23JQS)

The production of nature for leisure and tourism and its significance in increasing land value has become an option for financial investment and strategy in looking for opportunities to reproduce global surplus capital (Rainer, 2018). Especially in peripheral rural areas major profits are expected (and frequently extracted) from significant increases in land prices. Usually only the notification of the production of

upper scale leisure developments already drives land prices up leading to speculative real estate investment (ibid). This was a subject of concern also in Darién. Of specific interest for tourism investment in Darién is the long stretch of coastline. Various rumors circulated already about trading land at the beachfront for potential hotel plans as contemplated by an interviewee from Jaqué:

"At the end, they are going to have to develop here, because development over there is going to be exhausted, the physical space is going to run out, they are going to have to come here. The people, the investors, the capital. We found out that further over there 42 families that are not from here, have been titled land. That gives you an indication that they are looking for strategic places for tourism development in the future. These people buy the land but later sell it to the big investors that come to develop, they sell the land. They buy it and sell the land for millions. It is suspicious, because it is corruption that exist there in the government." (23JQS)

The government was blamed for corruption and for pursuing its own interest in obtaining land from strategically important locations for possible future tourism development. Several interviewees claimed that the government hindered local land ownership by complicating granting loans for people or not giving loans at all. Even in the case of having the economic possibility to develop for example agricultural or touristic activities, it was not possible due to the challenges of obtaining land. The government seemed more willing to support foreign than local land ownership.

As pointed out, much of the current tourism activity is under foreign ownership. This dates to the fact that in general locals do not tend to have similar financial opportunities to acquire land. A common desire amongst the interviewees was that tourism would not only be in the hands of foreigners, but also nationals and locals would have more possibilities in engaging with tourism. Locals viewed foreign land ownership dichotomous. Others had nothing against foreign investments while others were strictly against it. New projects could bring new employment possibilities but on the other hand people were afraid of eventually having to leave elsewhere from where they have lived for a long time:

"They are going to want to remove people, that is going to bring problems, that always brings problems because they want to remove those who have lived here forever, their ancestors, their inhabitants, it brings bad problems." (23JQS)

Developing tourism was feared to elevate the costs of living, thus leading to the locals to move out of the area in any case. Issues of land grabbing were also brought up in conversations. This was perceived a problem for example in the vicinity, and even within protected areas where land had been claimed to have been cleared for cattle. Land conflicts related to protected areas had reached such a critical level that even death threats had occurred, indicating the seriousness of the situation and opposite views on conservation matters. Land ownership was often considered correlating with the possibility of influence. One interviewee commented that conflicts related to the use of environmental resources did not normally occur with communities but with individual landowners and farmers. Raising awareness for example of the effects of deforestation was not so difficult among communities because they heavily rely on resources such as water, but communicating with landowners was often cut short.

Territorial conflicts demonstrate in practice, how environmental challenges and power relations become evident through tourism. The value of land and resources, and access to them demonstrate the unequal power relations and underlying conflicts between different stakeholders. Already the way how locals referred to tourism in interviews revealed much about the underlying ways of thinking. Tourism was discussed in the third person, or in a passive form. Tourism was perceived to “come”, or be something brought by “them”. Tourism was inherently perceived as something introduced from outside, which is not surprising considering the history of tourism in Darién up to date.

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 Reflections and observations

This study has explored within a geopolitical ecology framework, how environmental challenges and power relations are manifested through tourism in the province of Darién, Panama. In more detail, the study has addressed from a local perspective the main factors that have influenced tourism; the role of tourism in environmental issues; and the ways in which tourism has shaped the contest over resources, interests and power relations between different stakeholders. The findings indicate that by looking at tourism, many underlying tensions related to existing social inequalities, power relations and distribution of ecological benefits can be revealed.

The findings indicate that tourism has contributed to exposing the environmental challenges in Darién, but also locally caused controversy over the use of resources for tourism. Tourism brings forward power relations and demonstrates that different players are in an unequal position. The results show that the vague and changing security situation and power relations associated have reinforced the unequal possibilities of different actors within tourism. The study indicates, that Darién has already for long been misleadingly portrayed as a volatile place, and the international tourism industry has only consolidated this image. This has in part led to increasing environmental destruction as the remoteness and poor control of environmental legislation have enabled ongoing uncontrolled and environmentally destructive interventions in the province. On the other hand, tourism has increased local environmental awareness and interest towards conservation. The findings demonstrate that different tourism actors have unequal possibilities to use natural resources. This depends largely on their wealth and social networks at different levels, something one might also call politics. This affirms the politicized nature of the environment and the role of tourism as a geopolitical-ecological tool.

What is geopolitical ecology? In short, it is a means to analyze how geopolitical and ecological interests are interconnected, and how politics is influenced by the

environment. Although geopolitical ecology is a recent idea, it has firm roots in political ecology and geopolitics. The conceptual meaning of geopolitical ecology is yet taking shape, and needs to be further analyzed and debated as related studies are still few. Theoretically, previous definitions of geopolitical ecology have emphasized the role of geopolitical institutions in an environmental change (Bigger & Neimark, 2017, p. 14). Deviating from previous interpretations, this study highlights the significance of local actors in the geopolitical setting, and in shaping the geopolitical-ecological discourse. It puts “grassroots geopolitics” in the center of the tourism-environment-power nexus instead of focusing analysis on broader geopolitical institutions. Complementing previous topics addressed from a geopolitical ecology perspective, this study argues that the tourism industry shapes the way in which the environment is perceived and capitalized to pursuing specific interests. This study contributes to the growing research that relates the geopolitical ecology of tourism development to environmental problems in Latin America and elsewhere.

If we look at the research questions individually, one might at first question the relevance of observing tourism limiting factors for geopolitical ecology. However, if the situation was reversed in such a way, that the tourism limiting factors were aspects that had facilitated the growth of tourism in some place, the link with geopolitics and environmental change would become more obvious. Despite appearing apolitical, tourism is often taken into consideration, when analyzing how spaces of security and insecurity are understood, imposed and negotiated (Ojeda, 2013). The aspects that were perceived limiting tourism; weak security, difficult accessibility and inadequate infrastructure, poor education and knowledge, and lack of motivation; are all largely due to state policies.

In general, prior work has not specifically focused on factors affecting tourism and differences exist in what has been considered limiting tourism development. For example, Suman (2007b) has identified as priority obstacles the lack of identification of potential eco-tourism sites, absence of trained people in the eco-tourism field, lack of tourism infrastructure, and shortage of established limits and controls for eco-tourism activities. Surprisingly, the security issue was not brought up, although at that

time insecurity has been prevailing. Although carried out at a different moment, this study highlights the lack of security as one of the most vital factors in limiting tourism, and guiding tourism-related decisions. Security is a complex term, commonly used in political discourse, invoked by the practitioners of statecraft as a means to justify policy actions (Buzan, 1991).

From a security perspective, this study agrees with previous research (Velásquez Runk, 2015) that the image of Darién as a dangerous place is nowadays largely false. On the contrary, Darién was perceived a lot safer than average by the locals. Ironically, the tourism industry is partly to blame in viewing Darién as periphery and in maintaining its precarious reputation. As long as tourism continues to reinforce the prevailing image, it provokes outside intervention, which tends to be environmentally destructive. Eventually, the tourism industry can be perceived as literally sawing off the branch it's sitting on. Without its natural and cultural biodiversity Darién would lose its tourism assets. It is important to remind in this context, that the purpose of this study is not to take a stand on whether tourism is good or bad, or whether developing tourism in Darién is desirable or not.

This study affirms that Darién is facing serious environmental problems. The results demonstrate that the spectrum of existing environmental problems goes far beyond deforestation and forms a complex network of causal relationships. Tourism has been able to raise environmental awareness and interest towards conservation, but only locally. This is not enough, when aiming to find solutions at a broader level. In decision-making, the environmental perspective is not the first to be considered, while people tend to go for what economically provides the most benefits. Earlier studies have considered poverty as a major cause of ecological deterioration, while ignoring institutions with a broader role. However, a poverty-centered analysis represents only part of the picture, as there are several other factors that should be equally addressed in examining environmental degradation (Peet & Watts, 1996). "The danger is to neglect the obvious power of capital as a material force in degradation and, as a consequence, come close to blaming the victim albeit in terms of the situational

rationality of the land manager who is compelled to mine the soil or fell the forest" (Peet & Watts 1996, p. 7).

Despite the strategic location between two continents, Darién has for long been left in the periphery. By the indifferent attitude, and by avoiding presence and decisions, the State has exercised indirect power by not having clear plans for the province. This has left room for those players, who have proved to be the strongest in this situation. In the case of Darién, these include for example foreign investors, international NGOs and large-scale farmers, often with contradicting views on environmental policies. In Darién, stakeholder imbalances can be viewed as a matter of producing territory and thus trying to control the population and resources, including tourism, in the area.

Environmental conflicts were shown to affect the social relations in Darién. Stakeholder relationships form a complex network in the debate over interests and resources, and there is a vicious circle of blame between different stakeholders. The State can be considered to have certain control of Darién by not directly controlling it. The State has played a key role in Darién through security regulations and the action of the SENAFRONT. The role of SENAFRONT turned out to be much bigger than anticipated, and it proved to be a central authority in the province. SENAFRONT is in a powerful position in what comes to decisions and practical actions concerning environmental change and controlling tourism in the area. Locals have little possibilities to influence tourism and environment-related questions. The lack of agency of locals is reinforced by the fact that tourism is often something brought from outside, leading to locals adapting in molds created externally.

Although tourism plays a minor part in the economy of Darién, it provides an effective means of examining questions central for geopolitical ecology. It thus confirms the high relevance of tourism in geopolitics and ecology. The results of this study affirm earlier findings about tourism being a geopolitical-ecological activity, where the environment becomes inevitably politicized. Environmental change occurs within a socio-political-economic context. The theoretical intersection of tourism and environment is in the background shaped by geopolitical dynamics and power

relations on various scales affecting social relations from a local perspective. Environmental inequalities occur through the possibilities of participating and engaging in tourism practices on a local level.

Sustainability

The sustainability of Darién from a tourism perspective needs to be briefly reviewed. In the recent Sustainable Tourism Plan for 2020-2025 the vision of ATP for Panama is to "Be recognized as a world-class sustainable tourist destination, thanks to the extraordinary richness and diversity of its natural and cultural heritage, and the quality of its services". Darién is considered to have big potential and an opportunity for further development (ATP, 2020). Due to its remoteness, natural resources and high biodiversity, Darién is often conceived as a sustainable tourism destination, where it is possible to get into close contact with nature and indigenous cultures. However, this is a misleading image, because in order to be able to consider tourism sustainable, it should economically offer people a long-term and reliable income source; socio-culturally maintain a stable local society and integral culture; environmentally protect local natural resources; and, institutionally maximize opportunities for local participation and involvement (Shen et al. 2008). Clearly, this is not the case in Darién. Political stability, peace, safety and security are preconditions for sustainable tourism development (Nepal 2003). Sustainable tourism discussion needs to move beyond the nature and eco-tourism discourse to identifying more specific alternatives that can create sustainable outcomes. Rather than focusing on operational sustainability (i.e. renewable-energy-powered eco-lodges), developing tourism through a political ecology lens provides tourism and community stakeholders agency to achieve specific locally relevant, conservation and development goals (Knowles, 2019).

Darién and the "new normal"

As almost everywhere in the world, also people in Darién have been hit hard with the global COVID-19 pandemic. Travel has basically come to a standstill and affected the local economy. Two of my formal informants described that everything was left stagnant and people were waiting for the situation to normalize so they would be able to reactivate. People had been isolated since March, and the economy was paralyzed.

On the other hand, a third former interviewee told that in fact it was about time to start rethinking tourism a bit, as it had begun to follow the same pattern. At the moment, focus was on applying biosecurity measures and concentrating on the well-being of the communities, while waiting what the future would bring. The ongoing crisis in the global tourism sector has forced to realize the wider problems associated with the long-lasting unsustainability of tourism development. For Darién, it can be a good moment to start thinking about new solutions in terms of environmental responsibility and sustainability, at a local as well as at an institutional level.

At the latest, the past year has proved in practice how states have the means of controlling tourism even at short notice. It has also become clear that tourism is subject to rapid changes depending on the broader predominant global events. The situation has brought us back to the questions of livelihoods, freedom of movement and self-sufficiency. In fact, on a smaller scale, Darién has already experienced similar issues that have been occurring now more globally, as described in this research. These include limiting people's accessibility, closing the State borders and shutting down the local economy. All of these are directly linked to tourism.

In addition to the COVID-19 situation, not much else has changed in Darién since fieldwork was carried out for this research. Tourism remains of small scale, although an increase in demand was observed by the former interviewees I talked to. More cruises had been visiting the coastal communities, and there were more groups interested in seeking contact with the nature, culture and history of Darién. However, the number of tourism actors officially registered in the province remains low. According to ATP (2020), there are currently nine tourist lodgings, one tour operator and six guides, which is clearly less than anywhere else in the country. Environmental destruction has continued, although the pandemic was told to have "saved the forests" for several months, because extracting wood has been on hold. This is a positive sign indicating that with adequate measures the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources can be ceased also in the future. Considering tourism, the government still does not appear to have any specific incentives for Darién or the Eastern part of the country. In the absence of State actions, local organizations have

had the opportunity to, partly involuntarily, reassert their grip on the tourism activity, however, often with insufficient knowledge. The central desire was to gain more publicity, which could help in highlighting the strengths of the region to a wider audience and thereby further help in slowing down the environmental destruction in Darién. Interesting questions worth contemplating include: Would there be less environmental problems if there was more tourism? If tourism was a bigger source of income, would more effort be put in conservation efforts? Whose responsibility is it eventually to decide upon tourism development in Darién? Could it be that in Darién the environment has not been politicized enough? Is that the reason why the environmental destruction has been able to continue?

6.2 Ethical considerations and potential biases

Especially in social sciences, ethical issues and biases are present at every stage of the research from designing the research subject to publishing the results. These should be discussed for the reader to be able to assess the rigor, trustworthiness and transparency of the research. In short, research ethics pertains to doing good and avoiding harm to research participants. The Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics (2009) divides ethical principles of research into three areas: respecting the autonomy of research subjects; avoiding or minimizing physical, psychological, social or economic harm; and acknowledging privacy and data protection. Researchers need to carefully evaluate the relative weight of a diverse array of potential harms and benefits, and be conscious that these may have different impacts on, and diverse meanings to, various parts of a community (Israel, 2014). Bias, referring to the possible misinterpretations or distortions in the process and results of the research, occurs in any type of study. Especially qualitative research is subjective of nature, therefore maintaining objectivity is not possible. Objectivity refers to reliable knowledge, checked and controlled, undistorted by personal bias and prejudice, neutral, factual, and confirmable knowledge (Kvale, 1994, p. 7). In pursuing the goal of doing good, solid and transparent research, I will further discuss the choices being made regarding the research process, as well as reflect upon my own position as a researcher.

Although the scope of ethical questions and possible biases is broad, I will address some of the main issues relevant for this study. In this case of special interest is the ethical part related to fieldwork because already fieldwork as such involves underlying ethnocentric conditions. Following Funder (2008), it is worth asking "*How* do we access the *foreign* empirical world that we are trying to study and make explicit, *how* do we secure the best possible insights despite our status as outsiders?". Fieldwork was conducted respecting the dignity and right to self-determination of the participants (Resnik, 1998, p. 68), and prioritizing informed consent, confidentiality, consequences and privacy (Kvale, 1996).

In interviews, ethical issues are complex because the situation involves direct contact with the interviewees. There is always a power aspect present in an interview situation, as there do not exist any two-person encounters outside all hierarchies and power relationships (Alasuutari, 2011, p. 147). Factors such as gender, age, and occupation of the interviewer and interviewee can all affect the circumstances and the information gathered. The principle is that the interviewee has given his or her consent on the basis of appropriate information. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2010, pp. 19-20). Before each interview, I carefully explained the background and purpose of the study for the participants and emphasized that participation was voluntary. As the interviewer is bound by the obligation of confidentiality, I explained that anonymity of the interviewees would be maintained throughout the research and it would not be possible to identify anyone from the final outcome. For this reason, the direct material citations barely mention any background information of the interviewees so that no one can be identified. As the study has shown, the themes of this study can be sensitive and may cause disagreements between different parties. The original Spanish citations have been translated into English, so slight differences in wording or meaning may be possible.

Participant bias occurs when the interviewees respond to the researcher's questions according to what they think is appropriate instead of saying what they really feel. I pursued to establish a trustworthy relationship with the interviewees and tried to frame my interview questions in an understandable way to avoid these kinds of

situations to happen. I tried to stay neutral and avoid leading questions, which could prompt certain type of responses. In addition, I tried to maintain the interviews of suitable length not to fatigue the interviewees, which can easily lead to the interviewee just agreeing with the questions posed.

The researcher's personal identity; in this case me being a white Western youngish woman, affects the way of looking at the subject of study and doing fieldwork. This is evident and impossible to evade. Although I consider myself being relatively familiar with the cultural context due to several years experience in Latin America, cultural differences were constantly present. From a local perspective I was inevitably considered an outsider. Especially in indigenous communities the feeling became apparent, as I was unable to communicate in their native languages. I agree with Mostafanezhad et al. (2016), that empathy and sensitivity to cultural, religious, linguistic, social and economic contexts among others are critical aspects of political ecology research. "Political ecologists are frequently familiar with local languages and create social bonds with local community members that allow them privileged access to the more nuanced understandings of nature and the environment as well as political, cultural, and environmental change" (ibid.). At the same time, I share Funder's (2008) concern about the common recommendations of entering the field with "an open mind", and developing close relationships with members of community.

A central challenge was my dualistic position as a researcher and an intern at the UNDP Small Grants Programme (SGP). In the interview situations I primarily introduced myself as a student working on my Master's thesis but told openly about my background and broader motive for being in Panama. Some interviewees recognized UNDP and SGP as funders of different community projects but I tried to keep myself away from that position as well as possible. I made clear that I did not receive any economic benefits or have authority what comes to financial decisions. In general, my work among development projects involved traveling within the country, which gave me a great opportunity to talk to people and get acquainted with the broader scope of tourism on a national level, and therefore to better contextualize

the study. Regarding the actual fieldwork, my position at the UNDP provided me with many useful contacts, and largely facilitated access and mobility in Darién.

I was slightly concerned about the fact that in several cases I had to rely on the assistance of SENAFRONT, especially with water transport. Since they had the equipment and were moving around either way, it was only reasonable to ask them for a ride. It is worth mentioning that also many locals did this, so I was not an exception. Still, I did not want to raise any unnecessary doubts knowing that the relation with authorities has a long and complicated history. Generally, I was of special interest for the border police, because they kept track of all foreigners in the area and wanted to know everything about my movements. In many occasions I felt interrogated, but soon got used to giving the same explanations over and over again. My feeling was that there might have been some exaggerated officiousness from their part too.

My fieldwork in Darién took place mostly during dry season between December and April, while the rainy season is roughly between May and November. Seasonality affects local livelihoods and is essential from a tourism point of view because it influences tourist flows and activities. Although the climate in Darién is hot and tropical all year round, big differences exist in rainfall. I addressed the question of seasonality with locals; in conclusion that weather patterns have been changing and weather can be unpredictable. It is still important to acknowledge the aspect of seasonality, although not much could have been done in regard to.

During my fieldwork period I supported local economy and services by staying overnight in communities, eating in restaurants, using land and water transport, and buying handicrafts. I consider this in some sense giving back to the interviewees, as in general I did not have any specific "gifts" for the participants. In one case I bought a notebook and couple of pens for one community, because during our discussion they had briefly mentioned that they did not have a guest book for the visitors. I sent it to them afterwards with the boatman who took me to the community in the first place, and hope that it was a pleasant surprise. The final outcome of the research will

naturally be freely available and I will transmit it to some key informants. Also, a Spanish resume will be elaborated.

6.3 Limitations of the study

The scientific aim of qualitative research is to contribute new knowledge of a linguistically constituted social world (Kvale, 1994). Traditionally, the overall quality of the research in quantitative and positivist research has been evaluated by the concepts of *reliability* and *validity*, which indicate how well a method measures what is being researched. Generally, reliability has referred to the consistency of the research, i.e. the extent to which the results can be replicated if the research is repeated under the same circumstances. Validity has indicated to the accuracy, expressing how well the results measure what they are supposed to measure. (Golafshani, 2003; Morse et al. 2002). However, the meaning and applicability of these concepts has been systematically questioned in the qualitative paradigm. According to Golafshani (2003), in qualitative research context, reliability and validity are conceptualized as *trustworthiness*, *rigor* and *quality*. One way to meet up to these requirements is triangulation, which is defined here as “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126).

In order to improve the trustworthiness, rigor and quality of this research, the interview data was systematically transcribed. Detailed interview and field diaries enabled checking the consistency of the results, thus aiming for triangulation. To gain more deeper understanding of the phenomenon, I familiarized myself with previous studies and established theories. This study did not consist of any quantitative data, which, according to some perspectives, helps to consolidate the findings.

I began my field study with the idea of wanting to find out why tourism played such a little role in Darién, and how could it possible be linked with the extensive environmental problems occurring in the province. From the beginning, the aim was to make a qualitative study because I believe it suited best the purpose of the

research. During fieldwork, I had no specific theoretical framework in mind, which facilitated to be open for all kind of information gathered, and avoid being led by any specific theory. On the other hand, it also led to ending up with much irrelevant data. At first, I planned to use participatory mapping as a method to discover tourism activities, possibilities and environmental challenges in the area. However, after realizing some preliminary mapping exercises, I soon became aware that they did not provide as much information as I expected, and were not the best way to gain information considering the research questions I had in mind. In addition, maps were time-consuming and required more equipment. After weighing the methodological possibilities, I concluded that interviews and observation were the most suitable ways of producing deeper understanding and contributing to the scientific discussion on geopolitical ecology of tourism. In addition, these methods enabled taking the best advantage of the time being at the field.

Kvale (1994) recognizes ten critical arguments to qualitative research interviews: 1) it is not scientific, only common sense; 2) it is not objective, but subjective; 3) it is not trustworthy, but biased; 4) it is not reliable, but rests on leading questions; 5) it is not intersubjective, as different interpreters find different meanings; 6) it is not quantitative, only qualitative; 7) it is not generalizable, as there are too few subjects; 8) it is not hypothesis testing, it is only explorative; 9) it is not a formalized method as it is too person dependent; and 10) it is not valid, but rests on subjective impressions. "Qualitative research interviews based on conversation and interaction appears as a privileged access to a linguistically constituted social world (Kvale, 1994). These points were considered during the study with the aim to enhance the quality, stringency and creativity of qualitative research (Kvale, 1994, p. 26)

Focusing on the whole province of Darién led to the fact that the interviewees formed a wide range of people from different areas, of various ethnicities and with multiple livelihood activities. This complicated drawing straightforward conclusions but at the same time gave the opportunity for a territorial perspective in analyzing the data. This is why I made a deliberate choice to augment the amount of interviews to be able to better see a big picture and possible geographical differences. If I would have focused

only on one specific place, the amount of interviews could have been lower. Regarding the amount of data, I consider the number of interviews suitable for the scope of this research because at the last stage interviewees began to repeat each other and not much new came up anymore. A saturation point is attained when repeated interviews as a process of interaction take on a particular form (Alasuutari, 2011, pp. 108-109). Of one concern is the gender distribution of the interviewees. With hindsight, I should have defined more strictly the target group of the study. If I were to carry out further research, I would focus on a more gendered analysis as well as on the possible differences between different ethnicities. Based on this material I do not consider it possible to draw these kinds of conclusions.

My stay at the actual research area was relatively short from the perspective of using observation as a method. A long stay in the field helps the researcher observe people in their natural environment or in authentic situations (Alasuutari, 2011, p. 104). However, as this is not a straightforward ethnographic or anthropological research, the length of stay should not be essential to the reliability of the data and the results. Also, there were some places strategic from the tourism perspective that were left without covering due to limited time and resources, such as Mogue, Playa Muerto, Puerto Lara and Parque Nacional Darién.

Transcribing and analyzing the data gathered was a time-consuming process, with endless questions arising. When proceeding with the analysis, I partly by accident and partly out of interest, set out to explore grounded theory. After turning the material over and over again, I concluded, that the maybe the challenge of actual theory-making could after all be left waiting for possible future research goals.

For multiple reasons time has passed since fieldwork. Some issues in Darién have changed in between, which is important to acknowledge. I was keen on gathering more accurate information to complement the original data, but soon came to the conclusion that it is better to stick to the material I collected and not to mix different time periods. This provides good opportunities for further research as it enables a temporal analysis about the possible changes. I would definitely narrow down the

subject of research, determine a more specific target group and establish more strict theoretical boundaries. Regardless of the limitations mentioned, I believe this research contributes to the expectations of qualitative interview research by means of, in Kvale's (1994) words, "producing new knowledge worth knowing, convincing in its own right".

6.4 Suggestions of the study and ideas for future research

Based on the findings, this study suggests that cooperation and communication between government agencies, NGOs, tourism players and locals is urgently needed. Clear guidelines in terms of security and environmental practices should be established and notified at least on a national scale. Local actors of different sectors should be systematically heard and involved in any decision-making. In order to prevent further environmental damage, compliance with the legislation needs to be consistently monitored, and new environmental conservation efforts encouraged. Low-threshold education and trainings on various subjects could possibly enhance the interest of locals to participating in different projects and prevent the failure of initiatives because of disinterest and the lack of long-term goals. Attracting more national tourists could play a central part in changing the prevailing prejudices and misconceptions about the province. Also, the international tourism community should reconsider the way in which it portrays Darién. Experiences from this study can be made use of in similar contexts in different parts of the world.

Clearly, there is also a need for further academic studies. This research provides a basis for a number of interesting themes for future research and calls for tackling deeper more specific subjects. In local level research, regional delimitation would be useful because for example the coastal and interior parts of the province face different challenges. Thus, a more narrowed case study could bring about more detailed results. Of interest would be to study more restricted target groups. Especially the role and mode of operation of national and international organizations, or the perceptions of foreign tourism actors and tourists would bring insight to questions of geopolitical ecology.

A comparative approach on tourism development with another location could bring new perspectives. For example, the area of Bocas del Toro in western Panama is a good example how small-scale tourism can evolve to a destination for larger masses. As the lack of promotion of Darién as a destination was highlighted by the interviewees, it would be interesting to look at the role and possibilities of media and social media in handling tourism-related environmental challenges and power relations. Further research is needed to obtain more evidence on the causes and consequences of different actions. Besides qualitative research, there is also a call for more quantitative approaches from other research fields. In any case, future studies should consider the complex history and existing tensions of Darién, and eventually aim for the holistic well-being of the local populations. Topics relevant for geopolitical ecology provide fruitful research opportunities in the ongoing turning point of tourism.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to find out how environmental challenges and power relations are manifested through tourism in the Darién province, Panama. This study discussed the main factors that were perceived influencing tourism development, the experiences on the role of tourism in addressing environmental issues, and explored how tourism has shaped the contest over resources, interests, and power relations between different stakeholders. Drawing from a geopolitical ecology framework and based on ethnographic fieldwork in Darién, the results showed that tourism can act as a geopolitical-ecological tool in shaping social inequalities, ecological benefits and power relations.

The results show that tourism has contributed to exposing the environmental challenges in Darién, but also locally caused controversy over the use of resources for tourism. Tourism brings forward power relations and demonstrates that different players are in an unequal position. The significance of actors not directly involved in tourism is emphasized. The findings indicate that tourism in Darién has been influenced by the nowadays mostly misleading image of its unstable security situation. In addition, accessibility and the lack of education and motivation of the locals have restricted tourism. The study confirms that Darién faces a wide range of serious environmental problems. These result in part from the State's weak presence and lack of adequate environmental policies. However, tourism has been locally able to enhance environmental awareness and interest towards conservation reflected in concrete experiences. The premises for tourism and the state of the environment vary largely in different parts of Darién, highlighting the power relations associated. Different tourism actors have unequal possibilities in making use of natural resources depending largely on their wealth and social networks. Further geopolitical interests show through territorial issues and questions concerning land ownership. The study shows that by looking at tourism, many underlying tensions related to existing social inequalities, power relations and distribution of ecological benefits can be revealed.

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